



Endo and Kobayashi
THE LATEST ON TSUNDERE VILLAINESS
LIESELOTTE

Live!

Disc

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Suzu Enoshima
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Prologue: Once Again

“Hm? ...Eeeeeeeeeek!” The first sound that escaped Lieselotte’s lips when she awoke was a deafening scream. The palace was ten minutes away from this Riefenstahl holding, yet I would not have been surprised if those in the royal court had heard her.

“I guess this was bound to happen. How else is a sheltered noble supposed to react when she finds herself being princess carried by a man—who happens to be her beloved fiancé, no less?”

“Plus, out of every possible point in time she could have woken up, Lieselotte just had to open her eyes when Sieg was *in the middle* of laying her in bed. She probably doesn’t have a clue how she ended up here, especially since she’s still drowsy. I say her state of confusion is natural.”

In contrast to the playful tones of Lord Endoh and Lady Kobayashee, I was panicking in a cold sweat. This situation could only be described as awful. *Uh, oh, where do I start?*

“How? Why? Your Highness? What did I do? Where, what, *why?!?*”

I went ahead and finished placing her on her bed but then froze in place; her animated expression wildly swung back and forth as she muttered in confusion. Her father, Marquis Riefenstahl, looked at us with pity and sighed.

“You lost consciousness at the academy and His Highness carried you all the way here,” he said to his daughter. “I was the one to let him into your room. They say you collapsed due to general fatigue and lack of sleep, so please calm down, Liese. I don’t want you fainting again because of unnecessary excitement.”

“Oh...” Finally recovering some sense of calm, Lieselotte bowed her head to me. Still, her complexion didn’t look too much better as she spoke. “M-My sincerest apologies.”

The reason Lieselotte had passed out was because the Witch of Yore had

tormented her with nightmares, weakening her. This villain's final objective was to exhaust her psyche and take over my fiancée's body.

While I didn't know if the gods' prayer or Lieselotte's love for me was the cause, she'd stopped writhing in her sleep all at once while in my arms. The pair of deities then told me she was going to be okay as long as I loved her properly; still, this was no time to let my guard down.

“Liese-tan still doesn't look too good,” Lady Kobayashee said in a sympathetic tone. **“Hopefully, it's just because she hasn't fully caught up on her sleep yet. Whatever the case, I think it'd be best not to bring up what happened earlier. I don't think fanning the flames of her fears is a good idea.”**

For the moment, I decided to keep the knowledge I'd been given a secret from both Lieselotte and her father. Instead, I flashed her the softest smile I could muster.

“There's no need to apologize, Lieselotte—I'm your fiancé. In fact, I should be the one apologizing for frightening you like this. You still seem under the weather, so I suggest you take this opportunity to rest.”

“Th-Thank you, Your Highness,” she said, bashfully looking down.

“Liese,” the marquis said, “I'll go summon an attendant to undress you; I'm sure you won't be able to relax like this. Your Highness, would you please stay by her side in the meantime? I think my daughter would be horribly lonely otherwise.”

With an awkward smile, he beckoned to Lieselotte, who was still clad in a dress. Following his meaningful gaze, I saw that her fingers were pinching my sleeve.

“N-No!” With a brief shout, she unhand me. Seeing this, her father left the room with a grin. Left behind with me, Lieselotte violently shook her head and began piling on excuses. “Your Highness, please, this is a misunderstanding! This is, well... A dream! I saw a dream—a terrible one—that caused me to grow anxious, and... Of course, not to say that I'd ever balk when faced with a mere dream! In fact, there is nothing at all which can scare me, other than the thought of you leaving my—”

Deep into her stream of consciousness, Lieselotte rushed to cover her mouth.

“It’s literally not a misunderstanding at all,” Lord Endoh whispered.

“As expected, the only thing Liese-tan fears is the thought of being apart from Sieg,” Lady Kobayashee said. **“Remember this fact, Sieg: as long as you’re by her side, Liese-tan won’t lose to that stupid Witch of Yore.”**

I had no idea what “misunderstanding” Lieselotte was trying to refer to, but her love and cuteness were coming through in spades. As I sat there, trembling in awe at her adorable nature, Lady Kobayashee’s voice suddenly picked up.

“So it’s up to you to pamper her! Make sure she never feels lonely, so we can prevent her fated ruin! And while we’re at it, let’s take that personification of the root of all evil and beat her to a pulp!”

I swear it, I thought. Although I didn’t put it to words, my oath was sincere: I would not let Lieselotte be hurt. During the time I’d spent listening to the goddess, Lieselotte had come to her own interpretation of my silence and called to me meekly.

“You... You don’t understand, I...”

While tearful blushing still suited her adorable visage, I didn’t want to let her worry. I gently patted her on the head.

“It looks like you’re still a bit confused. Don’t worry, I’ll always be by your side. Well, *today*, I’ll leave as soon as the marquis comes back, so you can rest, but...we’re engaged, remember? Even if we’re apart for some time, we’ll never truly be separated. Isn’t that so?”

“Your Highness,” she muttered. All of the tension in her shoulders dissipated. “You... You’re absolutely right. I *am* your fiancée, after all.”

“Look at that reserved smile and those rosy cheeks, all from getting a head pat! Oh my gosh, this is the dictionary definition of cute! Ugh, they’re so precious!”

Strangely, Lady Kobayashee seemed to be in great pain. But as the goddess pointed out, Lieselotte was slowly regaining her usual pride. The conservative happiness that bled through was remarkably adorable; I could feel the

atmosphere of the room lighten up alongside her.

As we exchanged smiles, I once again made my vow: I would never let Lieselotte's terrible fate come to pass.

◆◆◆ Divine Conference on the Fate of Another World

On the first day back from summer vacation, Endo Aoto and Kobayashi Shihono were sitting across from one another. They'd taken their seats at a dining table placed in the Kobayashi living room.

"Ahem," Shihono said. Her tone and expression were both the pinnacle of sobriety. "I hereby convene this divine conference on the fate of another world."

Aoto nodded with equal amounts of intensity. The two of them locked eyes, looking as serious as they could. The gravitas of their actions was reflected in the mood. Out of the two of them, the boy was the first to crack.

"...Pft! Ha, pfaha!"

"...Hffffff—hng! Jeez! Endo, *you* were the one that said this meeting had to be as serious for us as it is for them!"

In truth, these gods were just a couple of high schoolers. They exchanged laughs and picked at their unfinished food. After a half day at school, they'd bought food at a convenience store and had then gathered at Shihono's house. Their divine conference was actually just them chatting over a meal.

"Well, Sieg and Liese-tan look like they're doing great, so I feel like the Happy End to End All Happy Ends is close! Let's relax and have some fun!"

Shihono's heartfelt joy was mirrored in Aoto's genuine smile. He nodded, this time without a hint of tension.

"Yep. Boy, that princess carry was perfect. It let us fill in Sieg and calmed down Lieselotte, while you were having a heck of a time."

"S-Sorry about that..." Shihono bowed her head awkwardly. She remembered how vigorously she'd smacked Aoto's back the other day when she'd gotten excited.

Yet Aoto merely shook away her concerns. Truth be told, her slapping had hurt quite a bit, but the only thing that stuck with him was how happy she'd seemed.

"Don't sweat it, not like you hit *that* hard. Anyway, with Lieselotte's mental state taken care of, now we need to worry about how we'll deal with the witch after she fails to possess Lieselotte's body."

"That's right. It's almost fall over there, which means they're only a season away from the witch's resurrection. I don't think Fiene and Friends are strong enough right now. The main goal is to keep everyone alive, but I don't want them to get hurt either. We need to pull out every safety precaution we can," Shihono said, listless.

"But isn't Fiene stronger than her game version?" Aoto asked. He'd been listening to Shihono gradually dip into sadness, but found this point very strange. "Plus, everyone else is too. Shouldn't we be fine if we go grab the last two romance targets? Not only that, but we have Sieg on our side. I bet the crown prince can just order them to come help."

"If we manage to get them, we'll have the same amount of punching power as the Reverse Harem Route, which should give us an easy win, but... Ugh. I have this feeling they won't be able to give it their all like in that route. The last two are a bit, well, difficult."

"What does that mean?"

"The last two are the 'older guy' and 'younger boy' trope slots for the game: one is Professor Leon and the other is Fabian, son of Viscount Oltenberg—aka Fabby-boo. Both of their routes require the player to actively pursue them, since they don't show much initial interest in Fiene. Fabby-boo is a really good boy who'll help regardless of love, so I think we can leave him to Sieg. But Professor Leon is, well..." Shihono's face scrunched up as she lost herself in thought.

"Is Leon really *that* tricky? I mean, I've only seen these guys in the Reverse Harem Route, so I dunno any details about them."

Aoto paused to sift through his memories.

“But I do remember that Fabian seemed like a good kid. He had a cute innocence to him. Oh, and his defense was super low, but if you managed to charge up his long spells, he had a super strong AoE attack. On the other hand, Leon seemed kinda shady—now that I think of it, he never opened his eyes and went around saying terrible stuff with a smile, so he’s *definitely* shady. But he still didn’t seem evil enough to leave his students for dead. Wasn’t he also the only one with debuff skills in the whole game? Going into a fight, I don’t want to give up on him or Fabian’s crazy firepower.”

“That unique debuff magic is the problem,” Shihono said, planting her face onto the table.

Aoto tilted his head, unable to comprehend why that was a problem. He waited for Shihono to share the knowledge she’d gained from completing all the game’s endings—particularly, the info that came from Leon’s routes.

“Remember how Professor Leon had spells that could apply poison and paralysis to enemies, or sap them of their strength? Basically, he was using curses—*forbidden* curses! I think they glossed over it in the Reverse Harem Route because of time constraints, but in his personal endings, he refuses to use his powers until the finale. He doesn’t even show a glimpse of his magic in any other route; that’s how big of a deal this is.”

“Ohhh, shoot. As a player, I just felt like it was mildly helpful, but it makes sense that the people of their universe would see it as a terrible means of assassination or something.”

Now that Aoto understood why Leon could not lend an overt hand, his face scrunched up too. Still troubled, Shihono nodded and explained further.

“Not only that, but Professor Leon’s history with his family means he can’t let his secret get out. Despite being born an illegitimate child, he was pulled away from his mom because his dad didn’t have any other sons. But right before he came of age, the official wife of his family gave birth to a boy, so he lost his inheritance. Finally, he decided to become a teacher instead of a mage, in an attempt to show how socially powerless and uninterested in politics he was.”

“Why is everyone’s backstory so dark?! What the heck, *Magikoi*?!”

Seeing Aoto shout without reserve put a pained smile on Shihono’s face.

“Right? In Professor Leon’s Bad End, his family murders him. Gosh, the devs sure are out to break girls’ hearts... Anyway, the point is that he can’t let anyone, especially his family, find out about his magic. The only thing that might drag him into combat is if he fell in love with Fiene.” Shihono sighed, dejected.

“So that’s why we have to give up on him,” Aoto said. “Now that Baldur and Fiene are a thing, I can’t see anyone else standing a chance. I doubt Leon wants to go out of his way to fall for a girl that has a lover—especially since it looks like their engagement has the blessing of House Riefenstahl.”

“To sum everything up, we’re not going to get the full roster,” Shihono said. She’d slumped into a sad sack on top of the table. “I wonder if training everyone else up will be enough?”

“Hrm,” Aoto said. After a moment of contemplation, he had an epiphany. “Hey, wait. Isn’t the Witch of Yore basically like a Demon King type of character?”

“Yup.”

“And if she’s left alone, she could destroy the kingdom or even the world, right?”

“She kinda did in some of the worse endings.”

“Why can’t we ask for help from people outside the academy, again?”

“Hold on.” Shihono had been lazily stringing along her answers up until this point, but now her head shot up. She slowly eased back into an upright position. “Now that you mention it, the thought of confronting a world-ending calamity with a bunch of literal children is, uh, kinda weird, huh?”

“That’s what I’m saying.” Aoto nodded emphatically. “You *could* just say that it’s a game and leave it at that, but this is a threat to national security. The adults better pull their weight. I guess Leon’s technically an adult, but he’s still, what, twenty-four? It’s wack to ask a band of kids to go fight the Demon King. If we’re gods, I don’t wanna be the type to order stuff like that—I wanna be the type to tell them to *stop*. Ever since I read Lieselotte’s memoir, I’ve been wondering why the crown doesn’t do anything.”

“Thinking about this normally, wouldn’t you call the police? Er, I mean, the

knights? No, maybe it's the army... Anyway, yeah, I don't see why we shouldn't just ask the grown-ups for help."

"I get that seeing a bunch of kids fight off great evil makes for a nice story and all. But we're literal gods over there, and our prophet is Sieg, who practically runs the show in the kingdom. I feel like we *should* be using everything that the adults of this country have to offer."

"That's right. You're right!" Shihono said, nodding over and over again. "Lieselotte and Fiene are the ones in trouble, so forget Professor Leon! We should've been asking their dad, *General* Riefenstahl, for help to begin with!"

"And the general comes with his own militia. If we round up all of his forces, I'm sure they'll be stronger than the one debuffer we're giving up. Plus, Fiene and Friends are a lot stronger than they were in-game—both physically *and* mentally. I think we'll manage with all of this."

Shihono clapped her hands in joy. Her eyes were positively sparkling.

"We don't even have to mention what a gorilla Fiene is," she added, "and Bal's been training like nuts, probably to catch up to her. Liese-tan's been happily training away with Fiene since she moved in, and Sieg shows up to the Riefenstahl estate to join them sometimes! And the cherry on top is that Art's been studying the ways of DPS healing ever since Liese-tan beat him to a pulp! *We can win this!*"

As the girl excitedly listed off the main cast, she came to realize that each and every one was stronger than their counterparts in-game.

"All right!" Shihono exclaimed. "Let's give up on Professor Leon! Our next goal is to convince Liese-dad and Fabby-boo to join us on our witch hunt!" She waited for Aoto to give a solid nod, then nodded right back at him. Shihono paused when a thought struck her. "Oh, but how exactly should we do that? Should we leave it to Fiene and Sieg, since they can hear us?"

"How about we leave the general to Fiene? I feel like that guy's been dying for a chance to talk to his new daughter—or rather, his *beloved brother's* daughter. I feel like he'd get more fired up to get a request from his cute kid than a royal mandate." Aoto's calm breakdown was met with resounding approval from across the table.

“That makes a lot of sense. I guess that leaves Sieg to talk to Fabby-boo?”

“That checks out. I think it’ll be easiest to send the crown prince at him. He’s only eleven, right? He’s still at the age where his parents make decisions for him, so I think we’ll need someone that has a real shot at convincing his family.”

“Wow, Endo! Awesome job keeping a clear head until the very end! Okay, this’ll be our plan going forward. Let’s do this!”

Shihono punched her fist enthusiastically into the air. Being showered with praise had made Aoto a bit shy, and he raised his fist a bit lower than hers. In this moment, the two of them were certainly divine beings that would shape the fate of another world.

Chapter 1: He May Be a Child...

I'm surrounded on all fronts!

The breeze today had the definite cool of fall, and I was here on a heavenly order to speak with Fabian Oltenberg. With the young son of a viscount before me, I was panicking more than I ever had before. Here, too, stood an enemy.

“Then, Miss Liese, what do I do if they attack me with ice?”

“Well, let us think. Ice magic has to do with more than just temperature. It includes physical attacks that...”

At the end of my gaze, Fabian and Lieselotte were having a grand old time. The two of them had been excitedly talking about magic and its applications in combat for some time. The boy genius had never had to put much thought into his spells; Lieselotte’s perspective—honed through years of diligent effort—struck his fancy.

“Huuuh?! I didn’t think these two would get along this well!”

“Now that I think about it more carefully, Liese-tan is the big sister to end all big sisters. Maybe that part of her meshes well with little Fabby-boo, who’s the youngest in his entire family.”

Watching them get along so well that it even surprised the gods made me feel pitifully left out. The two of them had opened up to a degree far beyond coincidental alignment of interests. The aloof prodigy looked just like any other innocent boy his age; my strict fiancée was smiling so tenderly. *Why?!*

Perhaps in part due to her free-spirited mother, Lieselotte’s senses of justice and responsibility were rooted deep within. That may have caused her to want to spoil young Fabian, who shouldered burdens unbefitting of his age.

Actually, on second thought, she did the same to Fiene. Maybe she was just sweeter toward those younger than her. While Lieselotte and Fiene were only separated by a few months (they were in the same school year, after all), Fiene did look young for her age.

“So cute,” Lieselotte mumbled.

Oh... Lieselotte simply had a soft spot for cuteness. The wide-eyed boy was indeed very cute. I could try for the rest of eternity and I would fail to imitate what made him so adorable. But if nothing else, surely I must have had equal charm when I’d first met Lieselotte...

Wait, no. I’m clearly confused. What even is this line of reasoning?



As I battled my own train of thought, the two of them continued merrily chatting. My plan to have Lieselotte open up the boy's heart was a resounding success, but it was so successful that I felt like I'd failed.

I rewound my mind to try and think of how this came to be.

Fabian Oltenberg was a genius. This was a verifiable fact that anyone who knew of his existence could attest to.

At eleven years old, he ordinarily would not be allowed into the royal academy. Commoner children of his age went to state or Church-sponsored elementary schools, and most aristocrats would be receiving lessons from private tutors. Some noble houses, like the Riefenstahls, would hire combat instructors around this point and have their children begin training.

However, Fabian was so gifted that he'd received permission to attend this academy early—or so it seemed on the surface. Truthfully, the crown had ordered him to enroll so that he could learn how to control the terrifyingly huge pool of mana unbecoming for someone of his age. Despite not being fully grown, he was already strong enough to burn a whole town to ashes.

Fabian himself was still a weak little boy. Balancing his physical capabilities with his astronomical magical talent was a daunting task. Bluntly put, a mere viscountcy could not hope to protect him.

As a result, his father was sworn in as a court mage. From there, the academy, the state, and his family all worked in tandem to carefully cultivate Fabian Oltenberg's natural endowments.

“...So that's why we want you to go ask Fabby-boo for help against the Witch of Yore!”

When Lady Kobayashee had explained her request to me, I'd been in the middle of talking to Lieselotte. The first thought I had was about the nickname “Fabby-boo.” I'd been thinking this ever since first hearing her call my fiancée “Liese-tan,” but Lady Kobayashee had a very unique naming sense. I suppose it was only fitting for a goddess to reduce this prodigal bundle of raw talent to a mere eleven-year-old.

Not to say he didn't look the part, of course. His shoulder-length glossy black hair and sapphire eyes gave him a childish androgyny. He was cute—enough to mistake him for a girl at first glance. In fact, an eccentric aristocrat from abroad had once attempted to kidnap him for his looks instead of his unfathomable power.

Of course, that didn't mean I could discount the *numerous* occasions when he had to be rescued from deranged people trying to use his talents for their own gain. There were countless villains trying to kidnap the young boy so they could brainwash him into a weapon of mass destruction.

"...Ah." At this point, I realized that there was a problem with the goddess's request. I'd heard that Fabian Oltenberg's many run-ins with attempted (and realized) kidnappings had left him with a fear of tall men. There was a decent chance he wouldn't even hear me out.

"Is there something wrong?" Lieselotte asked. She seemed puzzled by my sudden moment of realization.

"Ah, you see, I have to speak with young Fabian of the Oltenberg Viscounty. Unfortunately, I recall that he has a fear of tall men."

My short and simple explanation made Lieselotte fall into quiet contemplation for a moment. Eventually, she looked up at me with a cheerful smile.

"Your Highness, allow me to speak to him on your behalf," she offered with pride.

While being my fiancée was credential enough to speak for me, Lieselotte was prone to causing all sorts of misunderstandings. *I hope Fabian won't be scared of her.* Perhaps my rude thoughts were leaking out in my expression, because Lieselotte huffed at me, upset.

"I will have you know that I have *four* whole sisters, all of them younger. Of them, I practically raised three on my own—handling young children is my forte."

She was right, I supposed.

"Hmm... Okay, I'll leave it to you." My approval was met with a smug grin.

“With how kind you are at heart, I’m sure you’ll be a good mother one day.”

“Holy moly, the prince is going full throttle!”

“In my opinion, pointing that out to your *fiancée* skips straight past declaring the obvious and lands in the realm of minor sexual harassment.”

I could practically hear the fumes puff out of Lieselotte’s head as she turned bright red. Hearing the gods’ explanation, I could only think one thing: *drat*.

I had only meant to give an honest opinion.

“Wh-What in the world are you on about?! O-Of course, I have every intention of treating our own children with the utmost love and care, but I fear the time is not yet... I know full well that there are all manner of circumstances that could see a couple wed in their time as students, and I know that I am of legal age as per royal law, but, Your Highness, you haven’t even graduated yet... I couldn’t!”

“Never mind, I take it back. If anything, Liese-tan looks like she appreciated the comment, so we’ll call it fair play.”

Lieselotte’s rapid-fire speech paired with Lady Kobayashee’s remark had me smirking so much that I had to cover my mouth.

Gods, she’s cute.

Truthfully, there were plenty of couples that married before leaving the nest, primarily due to gaps in age. After graduating from the academy and entering high society, the presence of a legal wife would certainly smooth over quite a few social situations—though, honestly, I just wanted an excuse to marry her sooner.

“Oh! Enough of this!” Lieselotte shouted, cutting off my train of thought. “Let us put this to rest and hurry forward!”

She sprang to her feet and marched off in search of Fabian. Just when I rose to hurry after her, she stopped dead in her tracks. I wondered what had happened. Glancing back at me, she hesitated for a few moments and averted her gaze before mumbling in a tiny voice.

“...I swear to live up to your expectations, Your Highness.”

With that said, Lieselotte turned away with her usual straight spine and marched off. I couldn't tell if she was referring to negotiations with Fabian Oltenberg or our future child, but even I had enough sense to know that was not something I could ask. Silently, I followed after her.

...And so, we return to the scene of Lieselotte and Fabian opening up to one another. They were growing so close that I seriously began to worry. In their short time chatting away at this and that, he'd already begun calling her "Miss Liese," and their usage of formal language was disappearing by the second. *What in the world is happening?!*

"Oh man, I've never seen Sieg make a face like that!" Lord Endoh's voice was trembling. With laughter.

Fair enough, I suppose—I could tell that my expression was not very pleasant. At least Fiene was a girl, legally her sister, and (although cousins were somewhat removed) a blood relation. On the other hand, Fabian Oltenberg held exactly none of those qualities. The level of danger was radically different.

He may have been a child, but this was no laughing matter. Who could blame me for making a face like never before?

"No, no, I'm sure it's fine...for now. But who knows what'll happen in five years?" I could *hear* the smirk on Lady Kobayashee's face.

In five years, Lieselotte would be twenty-one, and Fabian sixteen. *Oh, I can't do this.*

"Lieselotte," I said, losing to my sense of urgency.

"Is something the matter, Your Highness?" she asked, totally unaware of my state of panic. Beside her, Fabian innocently peered up at me with similar confusion, causing me to feel rather awkward.

"Nothing at all," I said, with an excessively gentle smile. I pushed through my discomfort and went on, "Your enthusiastic conversation piqued my interest. What were you two speaking about?"

"My sisters," Lieselotte answered, beaming. "The twins are only a year older

than Fabian, and my youngest is two years below him. Don't you think they'd be perfect to marry?"

"I couldn't," Fabian said. "I don't think I'd be a good fit for a marquis princess."

"No need to worry. My sisters aren't very princess-like at all—in fact, they're so knightly that you can hardly call them ladies."

There is a definite cause for worry in that statement. Still, it seemed like Lieselotte had managed to alleviate some of Fabian's fears, as he was sighing in relief. Then, my fiancée leaned to my ear.

"I'm sure my sisters can serve as both sword and shield to protect him; in fact, I doubt anyone else would be up to the task of staying by his side. Don't you agree?"

Now that you mention it... With how frequently people targeted Fabian, the young noble ladies that could be paired with him were few and far between. The younger daughters of Marquis Riefenstahl had both the physical and political power to manage, but I doubted the same could be said of others.

Where they had once been in a limbo of pseudo-engagement with Baldur, all three of them were now free to pursue marriage. Best of all, Lieselotte's enthusiasm for pairing Fabian with her sisters meant she had absolutely no interest in taking him herself.

"I agree," I said with a relieved smile. "That's a wonderful idea."

All of a sudden, Lieselotte's face flushed red. I couldn't understand why she was shrinking away so meekly until Lady Kobayashee stepped in to explain.

"It looks like she's finally realized how close she got to Sieg and is eating a delayed wave of embarrassment."

So that's what it was!

Reminded once more of my fiancée's infinite capacity for cuteness, I quickly began devising a strategy to move Fabian from "rival" to "future brother-in-law."

"...Does that mean you'll be my sister-in-law, Miss Liese?" The adorable tilt of

Fabian's head as he spoke almost felt *calculated*.

"It does," Lieselotte said. "Won't that be wonderful?"

Watching the two giggle together like they were already siblings warmed my heart. It did, but they were still so close that I seriously considered trying to find another young lady to pair him with for the sake of my own sanity.

"You should just seal the deal with Lieselotte already if it bothers you *that* much."

Lord Endoh's words hit a soft spot for me. I knew how deplorable it was to abuse my engagement and sit on my laurels without telling her my true feelings. And I didn't like how narrow-minded it was of me to be jealous in spite of my inaction.

"But Liese-tan's the type to bashfully run away when you try advancing. She literally lost consciousness the last time Sieg kissed her on the cheek."

Lady Kobayashee's cheeriness also had some merit to it. Still, I wanted to capture Lieselotte with my own two hands before the Witch of Yore had any chance to interrupt us. I would not let some formless evil take her body.

"So," I whispered to myself, "I'd like to have her by the end of autumn."

Lieselotte was mine—I would ensure it, no matter who or *what* tried to steal her away. I put on my trademark smile and watched my fiancée happily converse with the young boy. As I gazed on this peaceful scene, I finally awoke to my own desire.

◇◇◇ Father and the Fae Princess

A few days after Siegwald and Lieselotte had deepened their bonds with Fabian, Fiene and Baldur found themselves in the royal palace. They were here for a formal negotiation with General Bruno Riefenstahl.

The pair pressed forward in a long, empty hallway. Baldur had long since grown used to walking these halls as a knight-in-training; his stride was casual as a result. However, Fiene was a nervous wreck beside him. Every step was an awkward creak, her face was pale, and she was trembling from head to toe.

“Relax, no father would dare to deny a request from his own daughter! Even without the whole family bit, this is the kind of thing you should ask the general for help with!”

“Besides, the person most at risk here is Liese-tan—Bruno’s beloved eldest daughter. From everything I know, I’d consider him a caring father. There’s no need to worry!”

The voices of a play-by-play caster and a color commentator graced Fiene’s ear. Unfortunately, she couldn’t see them as deities of absolute authority; at best, they were a couple of nosy friends to her. Their encouragement did nothing to stay the tears in her eyes.

“Are you all right, Fiene?” Baldur peered in from her right.

“I, um, think so. I know I don’t need to be perfect or anything. But still, the thought of having an audience with a real general of the kingdom makes me so nervous... Ugh, I knew I should’ve tried to talk to him at home!”

“Unfortunately, His Excellency is a busy man. Maybe he would have a moment at the main estate, but he’s almost never home when working in the capital. This isn’t a personal request either, so I think it makes the most sense to speak to him in his office.”

Baldur’s response was delivered seriously, but they’d repeated this bit countless times at this point. Fiene knew he was right, but couldn’t stop a pitiful

groan from leaking out.

“Ughhh, I knooow... That my brain wants to forget that fact just goes to show how absurdly big and sparkly this castle is. Is someone like me really allowed to walk on this floor? These tiles are *shining*. Honestly, I don’t want to meet ‘His Excellency’ behind this door.”

“Don’t worry,” Baldur said with the straightest face known to man, “Uncle Bruno is always nice to children.”

“Sir Bal, did you just call me a kid?” Fiene pouted. “I know I’m smaller than Lieselotte, but I’m old enough to be a proper lady myself. They’re already scheduling my debut to high society, you know?”

“No, well, I meant that you specifically are his child, and you’re also incredibly cute, so—”

“So you *are* treating me like a kid!”

“No, wait!”

Poking fun at Baldur helped relieve a bit of the weight on Fiene’s shoulders. Starting to enjoy herself, she puffed up her cheeks in an exaggerated way. Apparently, Baldur was genuinely worried that he’d soured her mood, and he quickly offered an explanation.

“Honestly, Liese told me not to share this with anyone, but the Riefenstahls have a soft spot for small, cute things. This goes for people too—His Excellency is no exception.”

Fiene thought back to what she’d seen in her sister’s room. It was full of pretty little dolls and toys.

“Generally speaking,” Baldur continued, “everyone in our clan and everyone we interact with are built fairly large. Frankly, we aren’t that pleasant on the eyes. Now toss in a delicate creature, so unbelievably perfect and charming—like you. What do you think would happen? You’d enchant us. You can tell as much from Liese and—more obviously—me, can’t you?”

Fiene ignored the rhetorical question and concentrated solely on making sure she didn’t step on her own dress.

“I had a feeling that might be the case, but Baldur says it out loud without skipping a beat!”

“I expect nothing less. His prey has already been trapped and snared, but he doesn’t let up on the overwhelming praise.”

The awestruck commentary fanned the flames of Fiene’s embarrassment. Unable to think of a response, she continued on in silence. Lieselotte was too sensitive to embarrassment, but her cousin Baldur was too dense. While Fiene fantasized about being able to even them out somehow, a death blow came in from left field.

“Basically,” Baldur said with unwavering confidence, “I’m trying to say that things will work out because you’re adorable.”

Fiene wanted to put in a word, but they’d arrived at Bruno’s office. Deciding that this was neither the time nor the place for a lecture, she simply sighed.

“Well, it’s a matter of fact that I’m small and childish. At the very least, you managed to clear up some of my nerves, so I’ll forgive you. But I’m still a bit anxious, so...here.” Fiene offered her hand. Unable to connect the dots, Baldur stood petrified in confusion. The girl grew impatient and looked up at him. “Take my hand. I won’t be scared if you do.”

Up until now, Baldur had praised Fiene so freely that it seemed as though he’d forgotten the concept of shame. Yet now, at the end of their long walk, he finally blushed.

“I bring you Miss Fiene Riefenstahl,” Baldur said, bowing to his master. Following his lead, Fiene entered the room and bowed as well.

General Bruno Riefenstahl had been in deep thought at the mound of paperwork on his desk until now. Hearing their greeting, he placed down his fountain pen and looked up.

“Very— Oh?!” Bruno squealed as soon as they entered his vision. This meeting had been prearranged, and he’d been given word of their impending arrival when they’d still been on their way. However, seeing the two of them like this left him at a loss for what to do.

“Is there something the matter, Your Excellency?” Baldur asked.

Fiene found Baldur’s distant tone and choice of words unnerving at first. But even though they were nephew and uncle, she remembered that their positions as knight-in-training and general outweighed their personal relationship here.

The marquis’s eyes flickered back and forth between Fiene’s blank expression and her hand, tightly clasped around Baldur’s.

“Uh, ahem. Is, uhh, is this...you know?”

“No!” Fiene shouted. Baldur merely tilted his head, but Fiene knew exactly what Bruno was implying and immediately shook off the boy’s hand. “We didn’t come here to announce a marriage or anything! We were just holding hands because, um, I was kind of nervous and... Anyway, that’s not what this is about!”

“Oh... I see...” Bruno didn’t even try to hide his dejection.

“Well,” Baldur said, “I will do all that I can to make it so we can report that to you one day.”

Fiene glared at Baldur, only for him to return a honeyed smile. The fact that he was making good on his word frustrated her to no end, so she turned away.

“Good to hear,” Bruno said. “Win her heart or die trying.”

“That was always the plan, sir.”

The senior Riefenstahl looked as though he was sending a recruit into mortal combat, and his nephew was just as somber in his answer. Seeing this scene play out before her own eyes was so unbearable that it made Fiene zip her mouth and stare at the floor. Noticing her attitude, Bruno suddenly shifted to a ginger smile.

“So, what did you come to discuss, Miss Fiene? Is there something at our residence that bothers you?”

Fiene vigorously shook her head. A mix of gratitude and shame flooded out as she rapidly denied him.

“Not at all, I couldn’t be less bothered if I tried! Lieselotte especially is so kind with all that she does for me! And the fact that you went out of your way to

take in my mother and support us both kind of makes me feel guilty, but...I really am thankful for everything!”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Bruno said softly. His gentle, satisfied smile was enough to soften Fiene up a bit more.

“Um...” Fiene took a deep breath. “Today, I’m here to talk about Lieselotte. My wonderful sister’s life is in danger.”

In an instant, Bruno’s tender expression lost all its warmth, sending jolts of tension through the air.

Fiene spoke of the divine prophecy and how it denoted Lieselotte as the Witch of Yore’s next target. She explained that the fainting incident and nightmares from the other day had been this villain’s doing. While Siegwald had saved her then, the gods had said everyone around Lieselotte needed to stay vigilant.

Fiene explained how even if the witch failed to corrupt Lieselotte, she would be revived at the end of fall to bring ruin to the world. She was to appear on the last day of the academy’s Festival of Gratitude, and Fiene asked for troops to be sent to the school on that evening.

Fiene stammered and stumbled over her polite speech at times, but she did her best to explain everything to Bruno in her own words.

“I want to protect my sister,” she said at long last. She bowed, and concluded, “Please, won’t you lend us your strength as well?”

Both as a father and stepfather, Bruno let out a long sigh.

“General this, marquis that,” he spat. “I’ve let this job eat up so much of me that I couldn’t realize what was happening to my own daughter. I’m a failure of a father... Pitiful.”

Bruno shook his head to dispel his frustration and shot to his feet.

“I swear, from here onward, I will do everything in my power to protect you and Liese both.”

Bruno stepped forward and laid a loving hand on Fiene’s head as she bowed.

After he finished patting her, she looked up at him with a beaming face.

“Th-Thank you very much!”

“It’s time to clinch the deal, Fiene! Call him ‘father’!”

“Thank you...f-father!”

Immediately after being swept along by the god of play-by-play, Fiene covered her mouth in embarrassment. She may have been formally adopted, but she didn’t think she was close enough to Bruno to be allowed to refer to him as her father.

The man in question had frozen in place with a stern expression. Fiene attempted to remedy the situation with an awkward smile, but that suddenly caused him to wrap himself in a bloodcurdling aura.

“Baldur,” he said in a grave voice.

“Sir.” The boy instinctively stood at attention, awaiting orders.

“Forget everything I said to you when you first entered this room.”

“...Sir?” Baldur and Fiene tilted their heads in sync.

Bruno sent a deathly glare toward the boy. He stood to directly oppose his nephew, exuding the ghastly air of a killer.

“You will marry this girl over my dead body!”

“Huh?” Fiene said. “What are you saying? Hey, stop it. Can you not waste your warrior aura like this?”

It almost seemed like Bruno couldn’t hear her speak. He somberly placed his hand on the grip of his sword.

“Your Excellency, your true colors are showing,” Baldur said, exasperated. “Also, please don’t draw your blade in a place like this.”

“Shut it! I won’t give her to you! She’s too young to marry!” Bruno was clearly not going to back down. “I’m going to protect her in my brother’s stead!”

“You’re speaking nonsense...” Baldur sighed. Yet in spite of what he said, he was mirroring the marquis’s pose and was ready to unsheathe his sword.

“...Huh?” Fiene was dumbfounded.

And, as if he could no longer see her, the air around Baldur had also shifted into something more sinister.

“Well, I will cut down anyone who stands in the way of our relationship—even you, Your Excellency. Fiene’s love is the one thing I will not concede.”

Wasted warrior aura, exhibit B. In the time that Fiene spent escaping reality with a simple joke, the two men had grown more and more hostile. She rushed to assuage them.

“H-Hey, stop. Both of you, stop! Oh, neither of you can hear me, can you? Or I guess you’re just ignoring me? Uh, um... What the heck am I supposed to do?! We can’t spill blood in the royal palace! Oh—” *It’s too late.*

As soon as Fiene sensed the first hint of movement...

“Hrgh!”

...she kicked out Bruno’s leg. With the momentum of her kick, she took one step, then another...

“Gah!”

...and landed a clean uppercut on Baldur’s chin.

Neither of them had expected a third-party attack, and they stared at her in a daze. Their hands were off their swords, much to Fiene’s satisfaction. She nodded heartily and placed her hands on her hips.



“I will be the one to decide who and when I marry. Me!” Her short declaration was so overpowering that the two men could do nothing but awkwardly nod. “Right now, Lieselotte’s safety is the top priority. General, I take it that you’re willing to help?”

“O-Of course,” Bruno said with a hearty nod.

Fiene caught a glimpse of Baldur in her peripheral vision. He was positively enchanted by her air of dignity, but that raised a concern in the back of her mind.

“...Is he a masochist? Does he like getting hit?”

“I don’t recall Bal having any traits like that, but the look on his face just screams ‘I’m falling in love all over again.’ I’m sure it’s nothing. Or maybe it’s more like, ‘Wow, what a mighty warrior. You’re so honorable.’ Oh, or maybe he’s proud of how Fiene went from being too scared to greet the marquis to making proper negotiations! That’s gotta be it! I...hope.”

Concise suspicion and a wishy-washy follow-up left a bad taste in Fiene’s mouth.



After finishing negotiations, Fiene and Baldur put the palace behind them. When their carriage began to move, Baldur reflected on what had happened in a dreamy daze.

“That was wonderful. The speed of your kick that took out His Excellency’s leg stole my eyes. And just when I thought that was it, my vision blurred and a vivid pain ran through my body. I don’t even think Liese could pull off such a glorious one-two. It was beautiful.”

“You’re exaggerating...” Fiene was tired of this. While it was nice to be favorably compared to the sister she looked up to, being complimented for her skill in battle did not make her very happy.

“I know it was a surprise attack, but there aren’t many people who can land a hit on General Riefenstahl. He’s our kingdom’s finest warrior. While not as physically fit as he was in his prime, years of experience and tireless training

have left him even stronger than he was in his youth. On top of that, your fist had the perfect amount of force at just the right angle to blow me away—I almost lost consciousness. Fiene, you’re amazing. First of all, you’re adorable. Yet you’re so incredibly powerful. I’m falling for you all over again. I love you, Fiene.”

Fiene stared off into the distance and ignored the talkative boy. Baldur seemed to take no notice of her attitude and placed a lovestruck kiss on the back of her hand—the same one that had slammed into him a little while prior.

“I never knew those words could bring so little joy...” For whatever reason, Fiene’s dejected murmuring caused Baldur to smile bashfully.

“So is he a masochist, or...?”

“Let’s chalk it up to a purehearted love for all things cute and strong, and leave it at that. Fiene, please do your best to look past the might-makes-right mentality of the Riefenstahls. More importantly, your boyfriend just kissed your hand and declared his love for you! We’ll go ahead and assume that’s the reason Bal’s blushing. Anyway, he’s super duper in love with you, so how about we put all questions about his kinks to the side and pay attention to him?”

The goddess’s breakdown caused Fiene to feel a bit awkward. After all, she still hadn’t totally made the status of their relationship clear. She looked down, dejected.

“Um, I’m sorry... I still can’t say ‘I love you too,’ Sir Bal...”

“I’m happy enough to know that you don’t *dislike* me,” Baldur said with a shake of his head. “I don’t need you to skip straight to love, but would you at least try addressing me more casually?”

“But you’re still an upperclassman and all... Can’t we stay the way we are, at least while we’re still students? I mean, Lieselotte speaks to His Highness in a really formal tone, and they’re already engaged.”

“That’s out of necessity, because of their social stature. In our case, you’re a daughter of the main branch, so you already outrank me. Besides, you defeated both me and the head of our family. You easily have as much, if not more

prestige than me.”

As Baldur pushed, Fiene pulled; this was not the first time the pair had discussed their relationship like this. The girl sighed at her companion’s unyielding answer.

“Everyone from House Riefenstahl sure loves mixing up power and authority. This isn’t the jungle, you know?”

“Give up on changing that part of us. That’s just how we are. But as the strongest among us, you’ll be respected by all—that doesn’t sound so bad, does it?”

“I know, but...it doesn’t make me happy to be called *strong*,” Fiene said frankly. Seeing Baldur eye her curiously, she explained, “If I didn’t win against those people that came to kill me, that would’ve been the end. That’s the only reason I got stronger. I wasn’t searching for some higher peak—I don’t have any noble goal to perfect my form or anything! Someone didn’t want me around, and when they came to erase me, I fought because my life was on the line. I wriggled around in my own blood and vomit just to see the next day. That isn’t the kind of strength to be *proud* of.”

After Fiene’s long soliloquy, Baldur hung his head without a word. He sank into deep thought as the girl continued to berate herself.

“My fighting style is the furthest thing from beauty. I always look for a sneak attack, use magic to strengthen myself, and only aim for the vitals. Do you know why I don’t use swords or knives? It’s because I don’t know *how* to. I’m worse than the thugs sneaking around alleyways—I’m like a wild beast sloppily fighting to the death. When I’m fighting, my mind clears in total ecstasy, which is how I know I’m not fit to be a proper lady. I’ll never be a real noble like Lieselotte, and I don’t want anyone to respect me like one...”

“I’ve got it. I’ll become so strong that you never have to raise your fists again.” Baldur cut in during a slight pause in Fiene’s pessimistic rant, and stared straight into her eyes. “I’m going to eclipse you, to the point that I brush you off as just another fighter. Then you won’t have anything to worry about.”

“Stronger...than *me*?” Fiene repeated in awe. At this moment, she finally realized what she’d been searching for. “So powerful that you’d never die on

me... I finally get it. I want someone strong to love—someone that can kill the gods themselves. I've been looking for someone with absolute might that even I can't defeat."

"I will be that person. If you want me to slay the gods, that's exactly what I'll do. In fact, I'll start by defeating the Witch of Yore myself." Baldur's solemn oath sent shivers down Fiene's spine, freezing her in place. "And when I become *the* peerless warrior...I want you to marry me. It doesn't have to be as a Riefenstahl—I'm more than happy to run away with you—but I want you to accept me as the only one fit to stand by your side."

Baldur's grip tightened around Fiene's petrified hand as if he were praying to her. She soaked in the sensation of his fingers: the callouses, the bumps, the size, the warmth, and the *strength*. Wanting nothing more than to believe in these hands, she slowly gave a single nod.

The palace, Witch of Yore, Voices of the Gods, her stepfather, and Baldur's god-slaying vow bounced around in Fiene's mind. Exhausted, she dove into the sofa as soon as she returned to her own room. Too tired to change out of her uncomfortable dress, she merely stared at the ceiling...until suddenly, someone entered her view and stared back.

"Fiene, a little birdie told me you called Bruno 'father.'" Her mother, Elizabeth, was peering at her with a wide smirk.

"Mommy?" she said, rising up awkwardly. "I'm sorry, I should've told you. I know daddy's my real dad, but it was, um..."

"It's okay," Elizabeth said, placing a finger on her daughter's lips. "I know. Mommy and daddy wouldn't ever get mad at you for loving Bruno like family. Besides, it's not the same, right?"

"...Yeah." Seeing her mother's smile change to something more tender, Fiene nodded. "All those lovey-dovey stories you told me of daddy are just as important to me. When I met his brother, he was so nice that I started thinking, maybe this is what it feels like to have a dad, but—"

"You thought it'd hurt our feelings to call him your father?"

Fiene averted her eyes. Elizabeth was right on the mark.

“That, and I didn’t want to use that word until I was ready to inherit the house. But then Lord Endoe...” Fiene trailed off, thinking back on how the God of Play-by-Play had managed to sweep her along.

“Don’t sweat it!” Elizabeth said with a hearty laugh. “You don’t have to think about all this so much. August and Bruno were so close it was borderline weird, so I’m sure daddy’s happy too!”

“I...” Fiene slowly began to collect her thoughts. “I still love daddy, but the marquis is like a father to me too. I think they’re both really important to me, but in different ways.”

“And that’s completely valid. You don’t have to call him ‘the marquis’ like some stranger—I think ‘father’ will do just fine.” Elizabeth watched her daughter breathe a sigh of relief. Donning a mischievous smile, she couldn’t help but tease her. “I heard Bruno was *ridiculously* excited. In fact, I’ve heard that his troops are seeing hell because His Excellency decided to retrain everyone from scratch to live up to his cute daughter’s request.”

I wonder who she heard that from?

Barely any time had passed since Fiene’s meeting with the marquis, and she couldn’t help but wonder how her mother had come across this information. She knew that her mother had resurrected the web of intelligence that she’d commanded as the Fae Princess years ago; however, Elizabeth’s grasp on the minutiae of the royal palace was far beyond what Fiene’d expected.

“That might not be the only reason they’re retraining,” Fiene said. Apparently, her kick and punch had evaded the reach of her mother’s correspondents. Feeling a little guilty, she mumbled, “But it’s still my fault, so maybe I should go apologize to all the knights...”

“Hm?” Elizabeth tilted her head. “Well, anyway, everyone wins if that keeps Lieselotte safe, right?”

“Oh, I guess you’re right. Let’s go, team knights!”

“Yep, preparation is always key. A bit of overkill is just right! This whole situation is so abnormal that you should be using anything that you can get your

hands on.”

The mother-daughter pair happily nodded along with each other. However, Fiene stopped when she happened to remember a certain prophetic message from the heavens.

“Oh, now that I think of it, the gods said that they wanted Professor Leon’s help. But he’s...difficult? For some reason? I don’t really know why.”

“Leon?” Elizabeth asked. “Chestnut hair, squinty eyes? Leon Schach?”

“Yeah, and he’s really lanky too,” Fiene answered. Truthfully, she wasn’t the biggest fan of the teacher. “The corners of his lips are always pointed up, but he never looks like he’s *smiling*. And his lectures are really easy to understand, but he never answers questions outside of class! I totally forgot that was his full name—he ignores anyone that calls him Professor Schach.”

“Wow,” Elizabeth said, impressed. “That kid’s a teacher now?”

“You know him? Professor Leon’s twenty-four, so...I guess he was eight when you left the capital sixteen years ago? I guess it’s not a stretch for... Wait. No, mommy, you were seventeen at the time, weren’t you? Why would you know him?”

“Hmmm? Well, your mommy used to be the Fae Princess!” Elizabeth’s nonanswer did nothing to clear her daughter’s confusion.

“...Well, you still *look* the part,” Fiene said while staring.

Even though she was looking at her own mother, the woman before her seemed like nothing more than a child in a grownup’s body. Elizabeth was caught off guard for a moment, but quickly smiled with all the innocence of a young girl. The fairylike charm that had been the root of her moniker was still alive and well.

“You sure are full of secrets, mommy.”

There were so many things that Fiene didn’t understand. Why did her mother still look so young? How large was her information network? How did she know Leon, and why did the gods want a quiet teacher like him? What made him “difficult” for them to recruit?

Although Fiene had endless questions, she had the feeling that the answers would be more trouble than they were worth. Instead of searching for the truth, she zipped up with a tired smile.

◇◇◇ The Fae Princess and Another

Elizabeth, the famed Fae Princess, had met Leon seventeen years ago. He had just been granted the Schach name, which remained alien to his identity even at twenty-four.

Before Leon Schach turned seven, he had just been Leon. As he was born an illegitimate child, House Schach had elected to ignore his presence and told the world that they had no sons. Yet on his seventh birthday, Leon's last name turned into more than a series of letters on the family register.

"You're going to live at the main house from now on," Leon's mother said proudly.

These were the words that had upended his entire life. Up until this point, it had been just him and his mother, and she had not been all that enthused about rearing her own child. Growing up in a somewhat desolate household, the unbathed scamp was suddenly and forcibly transformed into the heir of a noble house.

Noble children received blessings from the Church at seven, and their families subsequently held feasts to celebrate their societal debut. Leon's was less than a month away; Count Schach had already invited his peers and even written up a list of who was to be greeted in which order. Yet Leon had heard absolutely nothing until the day when his mother cast him away.

Taken aback by the sudden turn of events, Leon was quickly encircled by guards and ferried off to his father's mansion. These large, empty halls were to be his new home.

From there, his days were filled with uncomfortable clothes, stiff shoes, and bath scrubs that nearly peeled off his skin. Not to mention the fact that he received an education that he'd never asked for: he didn't care which dish he was meant to eat first, with what utensil, or with what kind of posture. The unreasonable demands that plagued him every day were chipping away at his

soul.

Leon hated his life as a Schach so much that he would go on to tell his future mentor, “I had a bad feeling about it all from the start. I should have run away, even if I had to kick aside my own mother to do so.”

Because of Leon’s lack of cooperation, his instructors grew impatient with him. They would sooner be able to teach a wild monkey to dance than bring up this feral child. Their frustration turned lessons into training—bluntly, it was well within the realms of abuse. He was beaten and left to starve; robbed of his will to resist, he inevitably turned into a hollow shell.

However, soon after he turned into a husk that knew nothing but obedience, a fateful encounter awaited him.

Hunger, fatigue, and pain—these were the three thoughts cycling through Leon’s mind on the day of his big event. Both the holy ceremony and the after-party were nothing but suffering for the main star.

The whole time, he’d been bowing his head to a never-ending line of guests without a shred of emotion. Among the crowd, he heard gossipers refer to him as “half a child,” which he quickly recognized as a slight on his birth. Incapable of mustering the will to care, he simply continued greeting stranger after stranger.

Suddenly, the expansive banquet hall began to stir.

“Lady Elizabeth!”

“Ah, the Fae Princess.”

“Beautiful as ever.”

Drawn by excited words of praise, Leon’s gaze joined countless others to look at the new arrival. At the center of all the attention was an older gentleman leading what looked to be his daughter by the hand; the charming girl’s pink-blond hair instantly caught Leon’s eye.

Her name was Elizabeth Marschner. With a slim figure and a petite face to match, the sixteen-year-old’s mystifying grace indeed looked like a royal pixie.

She broke through the crowd of onlookers enchanted by her dainty smile and stopped before Leon.

“Congratulations,” the older gentleman said to Leon’s father. Although the two noblemen began to converse, Leon was too lost in the girl’s stunning looks to listen. He could hardly blink.

Noticing his gaze, the beauty smiled more softly than the clouds in the sky. Even this tiny movement was captivating enough to draw a gasp from some members of the crowd. Yet the serenity would be cut short all too soon.

“Eek!” she screamed.

“Elizabeth, what’s wrong?” her father asked.

“Something moved over there,” the Fae Princess said, trembling. “Is that...a *rat?!’*”

The girl pointed at the ground, bringing everyone’s attention to a perfectly still rat. Despite usually favoring filthy environments where they could hide themselves, this specimen had come out into the open banquet hall. The marble floor was so clean you could see your own reflection in it, yet here it was.

Unable to process this incredulous scene, both the rat and the people around it had frozen in time.

“Eeeeeek!” A piercing scream broke the silence.

Spurred on by the sudden noise, the rat took off; from there, panic spread like wildfire. Some ran away from the scurrying rodent and others chased it, but everyone was shouting as they contributed to the chaos.

“It’s just a rat. I know it’s probably dirty, but still,” Leon said to himself.

His father had disappeared before anyone else. Now freed from his duties, Leon stood up straight. Suddenly, someone in the river of people rushing by him grabbed him by the hand.

“...Fae Princess?” Once again, she flashed him the same delicate smile; with an unexpectedly powerful grip, she pulled him away from the main hall.

Leon's heart was racing from the silky fingers tugging him along as he and the Fae Princess fled the scene. Eventually, the two of them slipped into an open room meant for drunk guests, where Elizabeth quickly locked the door behind them.

"Whew! Gosh, that charade sure was boring, huh?"

Leon was baffled. His mind couldn't connect those words to the pretty noble in front of him.

"Fae...Princess?" he asked in a daze.

"Yep, that's me," she said while cracking her neck. "Fae Princess Elizabeth Marschner, at your service! But, you know, it's not like I go around calling myself that, so I'd appreciate it if you didn't use that stupid nickname."

Elizabeth let out a boisterous laugh. Everything from her speech to her mannerisms was completely different from the air of fragility she'd displayed moments prior.

"Um, I'm Leon. I didn't realize that you were so...unnoble-like? You seem rather easy to get along with, Lady Elizabeth." Leon ran his mouth without much thought, but suddenly realized that she might be upset by his evaluation.

"Really? Thanks!"

Yet just as his panic began to set in, Elizabeth responded with nothing but joy. Breathing a sigh of relief, he glanced at the locked door.

"Don't sweat it," Elizabeth said. She'd noticed the hint of fear in Leon's eyes as he looked toward the entrance. "You saw the commotion, right? I think I saw some fool casting combat magic to catch it, so they'll be stuck over there for a while. Relax, relax."

"Well... I'm worried about getting punished for sneaking away, but I'm also curious as to what's going on outside."

"That's true! Everyone was going wild! Gosh, watching everyone's reactions was so much fun. Don't you think it's a bit much for *one* rat?"

Leon responded to Elizabeth's laughter with a quick nod, but there was something else on his mind. He opened his mouth to ask a question that he

already knew the answer to.

“That rat just now... You were the one who brought it in, weren’t you?”

Elizabeth had been the first to scream, but she was clearly unaffected, unlike the blue-blooded girls around her. Furthermore, when she’d smiled to gather everyone’s attention, Leon had seen her hand move from the corner of his eye. Putting those pieces together, he brought forth his findings, only to be hit with an instant admission of guilt.

“Yep. I was sneaking a bite in the kitchen when I found my snacking buddy, Karlchen.”

“You *named* it?” Leon asked incredulously. “And on top of the rat incident, you were stealing food... I’m not an upstanding gentleman or anything, but you’re weird for a noble princess.”

“Oh, don’t make me blush,” Elizabeth said with a bashful smile. “Being told I’m not a good noble is the highest praise I can ask for.”

“I’m not praising you. In fact, naming a rat and taking care of it is weird even for a commoner.”

“I mean, I named him because I was in the moment, but I don’t know if I took care of him. I guess I’d like for Karlchen to get away safely, since he’s the reason you and I got to escape.”

“In that sense, I suppose I should say my thanks to him too... Is Karlchen a ‘him’?” Leon asked with a snicker.

Seeing the boy laugh without reserve for the first time put Elizabeth’s heart at ease. Though, of course, she didn’t let him know that.

“Leon, you looked *awful* earlier. So bad that I snatched you away.”

“...I was feeling a bit tired.”

“I don’t blame you. Being the star of the show is exhausting. Have you eaten anything today?”

Leon shook his head weakly.

“I’ve been told that I will eat if I get through the day without causing any

problems. At any rate, there wasn't any time to eat today."

Elizabeth furrowed her brow. She heaved a deep sigh steeped in her anger at House Schach and dug around in the folds of her dress sleeve.

"Here," she said with a smile. "My head chef handed me these crackers to snack on. Eat up!"

Leon scrutinized the items wrapped in paper and determined that they did seem to be crackers. Although he had his doubts as to where they'd come from or how she'd snuck them in, he was too hungry to care, and he picked one up.

"Thank you very much," he said.

"No big deal," Elizabeth said with a bit of flair.

Leon laughed at her gallant response and began stuffing his mouth with crackers. The wonderful taste made him ramp up the speed as he munched away.

"If anyone from your family asks, seeing that hideous rat caused the dainty and frail Fae Princess to feel ill; you led her to a guest room and nursed her until she was better. Got it? At least, that's the story I'm going with."

Leon had no complaints as he accepted one cracker after another. Even if he had something to say, his mouth was too full to speak. Besides, he figured that no one would believe him if he told the truth.

Elizabeth's story made far more sense. The strangeness of this "truth" nearly caused Leon to burst out laughing, but he devoted himself to eating for the time being.

"How did you manage to bring in that rat—sorry, Karlchen?" After finally finishing all the food, Leon's complexion was looking much better as he asked what had been on his mind.

"Magic," Elizabeth replied dryly. "I put him to sleep and tucked him in my sleeve—oh, the *other* sleeve. Not the one with the crackers. Anyway, I tossed him in and whipped my arm, like this! And when he went flying, I undid my spell. That sure must have been a shocker for Karlchen."

“You can do that with magic?” Leon said. He had yet to learn anything about the mystic arts, and Elizabeth was thoroughly impressing him.

“Mm...” The girl shook her head. “Nope, this is actually a forbidden curse. I’ll be in hot water if anyone finds out, so keep it a secret, okay?”

Elizabeth flashed a devilish smile. Leon didn’t quite understand, but he nodded along anyway. As his head bobbed, he began realizing what it meant to be able to render someone unconscious with magic. Secrecy necessarily followed with how much danger it represented, and he shuddered in a moment of epiphany.

“Who *are* you?” he asked.

Elizabeth tilted her head.

“Hmm, I dunno. I guess you could say I’m a woman of ambition. I have a very important goal, and I don’t have time to pick and choose how I get it done. That’s why I learned these shady spells and always act the part of the good little patrician.”

Her smile broke out into a full-on smirk.

“Power is something that you should hide as much as you can. You might become stronger as you begin studying magic, but don’t let anyone on to your true ability. You and I are lucky: I’m a frail flower and you’re ‘half a child.’ Everyone already thinks we’re powerless. Isn’t that great?”

“It’s a good thing that they think we’re weak?” Leon asked.

“It’s amazing,” Elizabeth said with an emphatic nod. “Let them think we’re feeble puppets that can only smile and look pretty. When the final moment comes, our enemies will grow careless.”

“*Enemies?*”

“You heard me. For me, that’s my family and high society as a whole. All of the terrible people trying to tear me away from the one I love.” Elizabeth directed a hateful glare toward the ceiling.

Leon didn’t know what to say. She looked ready to take on the whole world by her lonesome.

Elizabeth turned her gaze back to him. Her expression was set with grave importance. “You’re the same as me, Leon. Everyone in your family is an enemy, right? Not like you can trust these rich lowlifes. At the very least, Count Schach is pure scum.”

“I didn’t trust him to begin with,” Leon said. “But I’ll be extra careful from now on to not let him shackle me.”

Elizabeth smiled in satisfaction at the boy’s answer.

“...Do you think I can learn to use that magic too?”

Leon had the will to not be bound, but without the power to do so, he would be stuck clinging to his guardians for life. Seeing how his mother had turned out had given him a look into what might become of his own future.

“Who knows? It depends on if you’re suited for it or not. Putting that aside, it’s *really* draining to learn this sort of magic. Curses tend to bounce back to the caster if you’re still getting used to them, and that’s a massive ordeal every time. When I was learning that spell I cast on Karlchen, it knocked me out for three days straight. Thankfully, that kicked off my image as a fragile princess, so it all worked out in the end.”

“I don’t mind. I want to try it.” Leon looked Elizabeth straight in the eye. With equal parts respect and admiration, he said, “I want to be strong, like you.”

“Heh, you’re making me blush. Okay, Leon, I’m taking you on as my disciple! Er, well, I’m self-taught and planning to leave the capital soonish, but I bet I can teach you the basics. After that, you’ll have to consult my secret room at the academy.”

“What academy?”

“The Royal Academy of Magic that I’m attending right now. But I’m sure my family’s going to marry me off with some random guy as soon as I graduate, so I might elope before then...if August’s body holds up. Sorry, I’m getting off track. Anyway, you’ll probably attend this academy when you turn fifteen to learn all sorts of things, just like every other kid with magical abilities. The school is older than you can imagine and there are old buildings hidden everywhere, so there isn’t a single person that knows all of its secrets. Plus, it’s a blessed place where

not even the *crown* is allowed to meddle with us, let alone my awful family. That makes it the perfect spot for hiding illicit goods, like my collection of black magic textbooks. I'll teach you how to get into the vault, but you're going to have to do the studying on your own. Deal?"

Elizabeth's explanation was laden with tangents; it was hardly what one could call focused. Still, Leon's response was already set in stone.

"Yes, master!"

Leon Schach had been a boy who knew nothing but despair. Yet his venerable mentor had given him the key to protecting himself. Although their time together had amounted to less than a year, it had been enough to save him.

Elizabeth had taught him the power of a fake smile; she'd taught him how the weak are meant to fight. That she had gone on to use these skills to protect her daughter for fifteen years was reason enough for Leon to respect her.

To Leon, she was absolute: nothing in existence could be more worthy of being honored than his esteemed master. And that very same mentor hadn't changed a bit in the decade and a half that she'd been away.

"Heya, Leon! You sure have grown up."

"What in the world are you doing...?" When Leon found his savior strung up in the air, stuck in a trap that he had made, he could offer nothing but a weak smile.

There was an empty courtyard in a remote corner of the academy. It housed ruins that were once the holy grounds for a heretical cult. Few knew about the decaying structure, and even fewer knew about the secret room hidden deep within.

However, on this particular autumn night, this hideaway was the backdrop for a fair bit of commotion. A petite woman was strung up near the entrance, and a lanky man was doing all that he could to get her down without injury.

"Oh, for the love of—what are you even doing here?! Stop moving like that or

it'll tighten around your neck!"

"Urp... I happened to be in the area, so I stopped by to see my adorable little disciple... How did you make this thing, anyway? It's literally sucking the life out of me..."

The long awaited reunion of master and pupil had been reduced to this sorry state of affairs. Leon sighed as he carefully unwound the rope and explained.

"I imbued this rope with all sorts of spells. Let me think... It has weakening, sleep, paralysis, and—what was it? Hallucinations and memory manipulation, maybe? Honestly, I'm surprised that you're still conscious. Not that I've ever used this rope, since no one's ever made it this far. I assume the effects aren't as potent because you're already familiar with curses."

"Sixteen years away, and my little student has surpassed me," Elizabeth said in awe. "I didn't know you could infuse stuff with black magic."

Leon was happy to be praised. The feeling of being recognized for his years of secretive hard work was incredible, but his distorted upbringing left him unable to honestly express his joy.

"Well, I had my fair share of enemies. This room is full of all sorts of secrets. Frankly, I don't know if this is *enough*." Leon finally managed to undo his own trap, and he gestured toward the collection of tomes that he'd inherited alongside the room. As the freed Elizabeth looked around, a deep nostalgia welled up inside her.

The two of them sat on a rug in the center of the room, facing one another. Leon searched for something to say. Rumors of Elizabeth's return to the capital had been pervasive enough to reach his ear even though he'd left high society behind when House Schach had disinherited him.

There were so many things that he wanted to tell her. He wanted to thank her and show her how much he'd grown, and talk for long enough to make up for lost time. Most of all, he wanted to at least express how happy he was to know she was alive, and that she'd come home after all this time. And yet...

"And?" he asked with a sneer. "What are you doing here at this hour?"

Leon ended up being unable to hide his displeasure at how absurd the

circumstances of their reunion were. It was the dead of night, and he wouldn't even be *awake* had he not been alerted to an intruder.

"Well," he said, "you were the one to set off the alarm spell, so I assume you triggered it with the hope of drawing me here. Still, what would you have done if I went to bed and chose to let my traps handle the defense? You could have died. Were you hoping to read through your collection again while I was away? You didn't *actually* just happen to pass by, did you?"

In contrast to Leon's disdainful interrogation, Elizabeth shook her head lightly.

"No, that's the thing. I really happened to just be around. Look, see?"

She pulled out a cat-like mask with elaborate embroidery meant to cover half of one's face. Paired with the time of night and the fact that Leon had not heard of any public gatherings nearby, he could only come to one conclusion.

"Ah," he spat, "so the infamous masquerade is being held in the area tonight?"

While masquerade balls could be harmless fun for those that liked to dress in costumes, the current fad around the capital was not so innocent. By discarding one's identity, deviant nobles enjoyed a single night with another just as unbound by common sense.

"Yep," Elizabeth said. She too sighed with displeasure. "I'm a widow, aren't I? Technically, I didn't legally marry, but that's how the world is treating me now. According to the wonderful people of House Marschner, it's my place as a widow to enjoy this sort of entertainment. Some things never change!"

"Wow... Nobility really never changes." Leon had put some distance between himself and aristocratic life, so hearing Elizabeth's story caused his face to scrunch up.

"I bet the Marschners want me to go play with some old geezer and remarry. So, I was thinking that I'd say I was feeling ill on the night of, but I realized it was right next to the academy. I put the old fart to sleep and slipped out to come visit an old friend."

"The fact that you were in a room where you could slip out undetected means that you were cutting it close, master. Well, I'm glad to see you're all right."

Elizabeth's escapades soured Leon's mood, but he truly was happy to see her safe. He glared at the mask and the horrendous party it represented when it suddenly came flying at him.

"Take it," Elizabeth said. "It doubles as a ticket, so anyone can go in so long as they're wearing that. You can enjoy a fling, or you might be able to get some snooping done—in fact, I got all the intel I wanted out of it."

"I have no interest in playing around, but I appreciate the avenue for information...or at least, I would, if this weren't a woman's mask."

"Oh," Elizabeth said, clapping her hands in realization. "I guess you don't need it, then?"

"No, I'll hold on to it. I'd rather you not carry something like this around."

"...Oh?" Elizabeth tilted her head.

"I adore you more than anybody else, master," Leon said with a smile. "I'd rather you not involve yourself with these foolish games."

"You sure have grown, Leon." Elizabeth snickered. Her little student had grown up enough to sweet-talk her, though she remained fully in control.

"I have. I'm as old as your husband once was."

Leon pushed the conversation another step forward. Although Elizabeth's smile never waned, her eyes were sharp as she replied.

"I see... But August was, is, and will forever be my only love."

She spoke as if to state a simple fact. Her unwavering confidence gave shape to the clearest rejection a man could ever receive. Yet on the receiving end, Leon's smile grew deeper at her words.

"I know. I admire and respect you as my savior. All I want is to give back in some way..." *For the time being.* He swallowed these final words.

"Really now? I heard my poor Fiene's grades are just hopeless. Professor Leon, won't you please give her some extra lessons?"

With a broad, playful smile, Elizabeth tried to lighten the mood. In turn, Leon answered by playing the clown.

“I’m not in the business of working extra hours. Besides, I’m sure her sister, Lieselotte Riefenstahl, will do wonders in my stead.”

“You ungrateful disciple! Your master doesn’t remember raising you to be this way!”

“How strange, I don’t remember you raising me at all.”

Leon and Elizabeth traded quips and snickered back and forth. As an amicable mood settled in, he decided to ask a question that he’d wanted to know the answer to for years.

“Master...why did you take me under your wing?”

“Hmm...” Elizabeth began to think. Slowly, as if to ponder over every word, she said, “I practically live on instinct alone. Just like little Karlchen, I brought you along because I thought it’d be more fun that way. But I think if I had to choose one reason...when we first met, you had this look on your face like you’d given up on everything, and I wanted to turn that into a smile.”

Hearing her answer, Leon showed her the biggest, fakest grin he could manage. Mirroring him, the Fae Princess flashed her trademark elegant smile.

Leon may have surpassed his teacher in the realm of magic, but he still couldn’t hold a candle to her impeccable guise. For whatever reason, that made him somewhat happy. And as the two of them enjoyed this heartwarming moment, Elizabeth broke through the silence.

“Speaking of the young lady who’s going to save my daughter’s grades, there’s this awful menace that’s going to sacrifice Lieselotte to destroy the entire world. In fact, it’s sealed away in these very ruins.”

“...I can’t believe you can say such horrific things without breaking character.”

The Fae Princess knew that she was no help in a fight. Instead, she collected every bit of knowledge that she could, uncovering secrets about these heretical ruins unknown even to the royal family. The gods had wished for her disciple’s powers, and here she was, ready to finally drag him on stage.

Chapter 2: Evolution, Devolution, or Surprise?

Two weeks after Fabian and my fiancée opened their hearts up to each other, I escorted Lieselotte home in my carriage. Afterward, I retreated to my personal room in the palace. There I found Fiene, Baldur, and the gods that followed the latter waiting to speak with me.

“My sister hasn’t been sleeping well for the past few days,” Fiene said.

“Seeing Lieselotte jolt awake from a nightmare and pitifully call out your name in the middle of the night is *rough*, Sieg. Can’t you do something about this?”

“Liese-tan’s stronger than before, so she’s had more luck pulling herself together. But until the Witch of Yore comes back at the end of fall, these nightmares will keep coming. That evil witch must be going all out to weaken her before the final stretch... I’ll kill that stupid witch!”

Fiene, Lord Endoh, and Lady Kobayashee all expressed their concern for Lieselotte, filling me with a sense of pressing duty—*wait*. A mild bit of panic ran through my mind: *Why do all of you know what Lieselotte is up to at night? Are you all watching her? Especially you, Lord Endoh.*

“From my point of view,” Baldur said, “Liese has been particularly unstable as of late. She blackmailed Fiene and I into a relationship out of nowhere, only to start crying about her own ‘lack of charm’ the very next second. Before I knew it, she started dragging around Artur Richter, saying she was going to train him into a warrior...but I think that’s just an excuse to blow off steam.”

“Well,” Fiene said, “I’m sure Sir Richter can take the hits. He can just heal himself later. Besides, he said he wanted to get as strong as I am. There’s no better way than to have a bunch of near-death experiences! But, well, Lieselotte *does* seem to be in better spirits after she ‘trains’ him.”

My thoughts were derailed by Baldur and Fiene continuing the conversation. Mild panic was replaced by pity for my best friend and a growing sense of

urgency. While it was true that Art had expressed interest in learning Fiene's skills, I couldn't exactly condone him being beaten nearly to death.

Lieselotte would never fail to hold back, of course. Furthermore, Art's restorative capabilities were at the top of the kingdom. I wasn't worried about a freak accident. I was more upset that my fiancée was in such dire straits that this was the only way she could calm herself.

That, and I didn't want to let Art get tossed around like this. As a friend.

Let me also mention that Lieselotte was the cutest being in all the world, so the "lack of charm" that Baldur correctly mocked was obviously nothing to cry over. Still, that didn't change the fact that she herself had bought into this ridiculous notion.

"...We need to do something soon," I whispered. Both Fiene and Baldur nodded solemnly in response.

"There are two things we need to happen," Lady Kobayashee said. "One, a certain somebody has to keep Liese-tan's heart strong enough to resist the brainwashing. Two, we gotta get enough raw power to insta-kill the witch when she spawns."

"I'm pretty sure we're good on that front," Lord Endoh said. "I mean, Bal and Fiene alone can beat her with the power of love, as long as they get a bit of help from the game's god. Honestly, I think our prep is kinda overkill..."

"Yeah, but since the witch isn't going to have Lieselotte's body, physical attacks will barely work on her. That makes her super annoying. But it also means she's weaker than normal, so I kinda think we've got enough already too. Now, all that's left is to make sure her emotional side is nice and stable! Fiene was the one to do it in-game, but now we've got Sieg! It's all up to you, Prince Charming!"

Put on the spot by literal gods, I was incredibly uncomfortable. Fiene had convinced her adoptive father, General Riefenstahl, to help. Lieselotte had made friends with the genius Fabian Oltenberg, who promised to accompany us. I was *painfully* aware that the remaining task was my responsibility.

Considering how embarrassingly jealous I'd gotten over Lieselotte's

interactions with Fabian, I truly wanted to make her mine in more than name alone. And yet...

“But my sister keeps running away!” Fiene said to the gods, laughing.

I hung my head. Lieselotte was avoiding me—and her evasion only worsened the more I tried to show my love for her. When I gave her gifts, she thanked me with all the polite reserve of a representative of House Riefenstahl. When I spoke to her at school, she looked unbelievably troubled. Even today, when I’d given her a ride in my carriage, she’d turned away after a mere brush of her hair.

“That’s right,” I said. “Seeing her scurry around with a bright red face is adorable, but I would honestly like to see her accept my affection more sincerely...”

“My deepest apologies, Your Highness,” Baldur said with a bow. “Liese has devoted every waking moment to polishing herself to be worthy of being by your side. As a result, the one skill she failed to learn is human interactions. You could say that she has few points of experience. Frankly, I don’t think she’s ever had an innocent friendship free from court influence, let alone any concept of normal romance.”

Now that I thought about it, I’d never seen Lieselotte enjoy herself with a friend her age. Although she was skilled at keeping up her social image, her connections were primarily older folks recognizing her talents or younger children looking up to her. None of her relationships were what one could call friendships.

“So this is what happens when you drag on your first love for over a decade...”

“I think part of it is Liese-tan’s natural awkwardness. But personally, I feel like she just can’t handle how much she loves Sieg. She’s probably thinking, ‘I’m so happy I’m gonna die!’ or ‘Things are going too well! This can’t be real!’ You know?”

“I agree with Lady Kobayashie,” Fiene said. “I think Lieselotte has an unhealthy level of respect for you, Your Highness. You’re only human, but it feels like she thinks you’re a *god*. She glorifies you to the point of worship.”

How in the world am I supposed to fix that? My incredulity must have shown on my face, because Fiene laughed at me and offered a simple solution.

“Well, even if she runs away, it’s not like she hates you. That means all you have to do is chase her into a corner where she can’t escape!”

“Would Liese’s heart hold out if he did that?” Baldur asked gravely.

“It’s fine!” Fiene said, smiling. “Sir Richter and I can restart a stopped heart or two with no problem!”

That is not what I consider to be “fine” in any way. Despite my gut reaction, I’d never heard of someone having a heart attack from embarrassment, so I figured it would be okay.

“Truthfully, we don’t have time to sit around waiting. I’ll get my love through Lieselotte’s skull even if it means pushing harder than I’m comfortable with.”

Seeing my resolution, Fiene nodded enthusiastically and Baldur stared at me in surprise.

“I would have never thought you to pay so much mind to Liese—no, to any one person in particular, Your Highness.”

Thinking back, Art had said something similar.

“I’m not so perfect that I wouldn’t fall in love and feel the pangs of jealousy. As the crown prince, I make it a point to not let it show, but...I don’t see any reason to hide my true affection for my future queen. Perhaps that’s the reason I’ve learned to be so honest with myself as of late.”

Something clicked in Baldur’s mind, and he gave a deep nod. Ironically, my own explanation reminded me that my long history of repressed emotions left me ill-prepared to express them when push came to shove.

“...This won’t be easy,” I whispered to no one in particular.

“Break a leg, Sieg!”

“You’re the only one who can make Liese-tan happy! Give it your all! We’re rooting for you!”

With the gods' favor on my side, I woke the next day with renewed resolve. Class was not in session that day, but I received a letter from Lieselotte that read, "There is something I would like to discuss. May I ask for a moment of your time?" Having steeled myself the day before, I instantly accepted her summons.

"Your Highness, I adore you; as such, I will not succumb to the trifling attacks of the Witch of Yore."

And so, later in the day, I found myself listening to this strange declaration. Lieselotte's characteristic embarrassment was nowhere to be found, and I was utterly perplexed. Words alone would suggest that she was expressing her love for me, but I sensed exactly zero sweetness in her tone. Her amethyst eyes gleamed with determination—maybe even with *anger*.

Um... What exactly is going on here?

For the past several days, Lieselotte Riefenstahl had been in a bind. She'd acquainted herself with Fabian Oltenberg half a month prior, and ever since, Siegwald had been acting *suspiciously* friendly with her.

Day in and day out, the prince sent flowers and gems of all sorts to her home. When the two passed one another at the academy, he promptly called out to her—even if he already had company. For a man who'd long refuted favoritism to preserve social harmony, this was markedly strange behavior. This was the dilemma that had been eating away at her these past few days.

"Lieselotte, what kind of dress would you like to wear for the Festival of Gratitude? We ought to match our attire as a couple, and I think this would be a wonderful opportunity to send you something. Do you have anything in mind?" Siegwald asked with a gentle smile.

Lieselotte's pulse quickened due to their close proximity in the prince's carriage. Still, the girl could not escape the thought that plagued her: *This level of attention is unnatural*. Frankly, she could hardly believe that he'd invited her to ride home with him in the first place.

“Personally, I have no objections, so long as our garments do not bring you shame, Your Highness. Not that you would need one such as I to tell you such things, of course.” Lieselotte answered indifferently in an attempt to buy time to calm herself.

Siegwald lovingly gazed at his disinterested fiancée and took a lock of her hair in hand. Joyfully twirling it about, he continued on.

“Really? Then how about I send you the dress I want to see you in? I wonder what would suit you best... If nothing else, I want to include a shade of gold in the design—it’s the color of my eyes and your hair, after all.”

“My hair,” Lieselotte stammered, struggling to catch her breath. “Please, refrain from disheveling my carefully arranged hair.”

“Ah, I’m sorry. You’re right. I’ll save that for another occasion,” he said, instantly releasing her.

The honey drills that three maids had painstakingly produced that morning immediately regained their usual curls. Yet Lieselotte’s mind was stuck on the “other occasion” Siegwald had mentioned.

He’s going to dishevel my hair? ...How? A rather steamy answer floated to mind; she glared at Siegwald and raised her voice in an attempt to dispel her own thoughts.

“Would you please not tease me?!”

“Pft, ha ha! I’m sorry, Lieselotte. I just can’t help myself with how cute you are.”

The girl continued glaring as the prince broke out into laughter.

“C-Cute? I have no need for insincere flattery. I know better than all others that I am far removed from the charms that Fiene and Fabian possess.”

Lieselotte had often been told that she was as cold as she was beautiful. The thought caused her to sulk. Seeing this, Siegwald’s expression grew even more gentle.

“You’re the cutest person in the whole world, Lieselotte.”

Happiness, embarrassment, sadness, frustration, and pain all jumbled up

inside of Lieselotte at once. She could feel the onset of tears, so she quickly turned away and stared icily out the window.

The sadness, frustration, and pain she felt were no less real than her joy. After all, she chalked up Siegwald's recent shift in attitude to no more than an act of pity.

Last month, Lieselotte had collapsed at the academy due to an unbroken streak of terrible nightmares. A ray of light and two distant voices had saved her from the darkness, but the dreams still continued.

Regardless, Lieselotte was fine now. Yet evidently, the prince did not agree. His actions were motivated only by his responsibility as a prophet and leader of the kingdom. At most, he acted this way because she was a member of the valuable Riefenstahl lineage and officially engaged to him.

Convinced that there could be no other reason for Siegwald's kindness, Lieselotte hated how ecstatic his forced smiles could make her. Disappointed with her own ineptitude, she knew she needed to quell her overflowing love.

Ah. This dream again.

That night, Lieselotte felt somewhat detached as the familiar nightmare swallowed her whole. She was unable to speak here. The darkness blurred her senses and all she could hear was a horrible voice.

"What a charmless wretch you are."

I'm well aware. Yet an everlasting mask is quite useful for a queen.

"No one will ever love you."

I need no love—my own affection for His Highness is enough.

"That girl, *Fiene*, will steal all that you hold dear."

How fitting. That must be the price for all the love she gives me every day.

"You must be frustrated."

Not at all.

"You must be sad."

Not at all.

“You must be jealous.”

Not at all. I don't feel that way in the slightest. I wonder, who might you be speaking of?

One by one, Lieselotte answered the atrocious statements in the back of her mind. For a time, the terrible voice had swayed her—but she had long since grown used to its whispers. Mute as she was, her heart was now strong enough to instantly snap back.

The abhorrent voice was unaffected by Lieselotte's resilience. It continued without pause.

“‘If only Fiene were gone...’ I know that's what you truly believe.”

Not at all. How lonely I would be without my dear little sister.

“That charming girl enchants all those who cross her path...even your beloved. He will take her hand and leave your side forever.”

Lieselotte could not let this claim slide. Taken by a rage like no other, she screamed in the recesses of her soul.

Don't you dare! He is not that kind of man! You have no idea—not a single clue—how tirelessly he beats down his own desires, how diligently he endures loneliness for the sake of our people! Do. Not. Insult him!

The voice vanished. Surrounded by nothing but the flames of her own fury and pride, Lieselotte drifted in the silent dream.

I am Lieselotte Riefenstahl, proud daughter of Bruno Riefenstahl. I am she who will take the throne as His Highness Siegwald's queen, the one chosen by the goddess to protect him. Here is where I make my stand!

As Lieselotte's will burned on, the fuzzy senses that had been lost in the darkness slowly returned to her.

“No, this can't be...” For the first time, the voice wavered.

“Ah...” Lieselotte's voice was faint yet weighty. “So this is where you've been, witch.”

The Witch of Yore swallowed her breath in fear. And just when Lieselotte's hand reached out to grab her...

"Don't test me, *Witch of Yore!*"

These were the first words Lieselotte heaved between gulps of air as she woke in the morning. She could not remember where she had learned of the horrific entity's true name. While Lieselotte knew not who had taught her, she could still sense that person's lingering presence and protective voice.

Thus, at the end of her dream, she was certain of her victory. Her love for Siegwald, combined with this mysterious guardian angel's power, was sure to win out against the witch. Unfortunately, the villain had gotten away.

Swearing to not let her next chance slip away, Lieselotte rolled out of bed.

"Oh, how infuriating! I don't care what anyone has to say—I *will* be queen. I *will* marry His Highness!"

Lieselotte spoke strongly, as if to beat the words into both the witch's head and her own. She marched toward the thick curtains covering a majestic window and continued.

"I will say this as many times as it takes: I do not need His Highness's Love. My own is enough! I will adore him one-sidedly and do all that I can to support him as he shoulders the entire nation. That is all I ask. I shall not lose—not to Fiene, the witch, nor anyone else!"

Lieselotte tore the curtains open with vigor, flooding her room with sunlight.

"The fact that not even *he* understands that...is vexing."

Bathed in the morning sun, her lips curled into a tired smile. With class being out of session for the day, they would not have an opportunity to meet. So, she simply needed to *make* an opportunity. Lieselotte quickly penned a letter to ask if she could come visit him.

She wanted to see Siegwald right away. Her honey-blond hair shimmered in the light as brilliantly as her newfound resolution.



Um... What exactly is going on here?

“Congratulations! Your Lieselotte has evolved into a tsundereally-pissed.”

“I dunno if this counts as an evolution or a devolution, but this sure is surprising,” Lady Kobayashee said. **“Hm, it looks like the witch’s mental attacks have had a weird effect on Liese-tan’s psyche... That being said, I won’t deny that she looks *super* mad.”**

Neither Lord Endoh’s playfulness nor Lady Kobayashee’s contemplative tone did much to alleviate my confusion.

I don’t get it.

Seeing Lieselotte sit on the sofa across from me was odd. Just a day ago, Fiene had been in the exact same spot, with Baldur standing behind her. Our point of discussion had been what to do about Lieselotte’s constant attempts to avoid me, and our conclusion was that I needed to chase her until she could no longer run.

So why was I the one being backed into a corner?

“Thank...you?”

Unable to process what was happening, I tried thanking her. I just couldn’t think of anything better.

Lieselotte smiled in satisfaction and nodded. “But of course. I would never lose to something so crass. In fact, my love for you would never lose to anything at all. Last night, I discovered that intense emotion allows me to communicate with that *thing*. I swear to you that I will spend every night for the rest of time, if that is what it takes, showing that foul creature how incredibly spectacular you are!”

After an emphatic proclamation, Lieselotte’s fiery eyes finally began to simmer down. She took a breath and smiled as though a weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

“Your Highness,” she said, “when I think of you, I feel so very warm and happy. I can and will do anything if it means I can be by your side. I should be

the one thanking you.”

I was captivated by her smile. As a result, I just sat there and listened to her earnest feelings.

“So please, don’t worry for me. My love for you is enough to protect me. I know that I’ve caused Fiene and Bal a great deal of grief these past few days, but the witch doesn’t scare me anymore. That’s why you’ve doted on me as of late, is it not?”

“Uh... Things are taking an unexpected turn!”

“Liese-tan’s perception of Sieg is so warped that she must have thought his recent change in attitude was for some grander purpose. Truth is, he was just being a big baby about her fawning over Fabby-boo like a little brother... Sieg, you act too cool for your own good.”

The exasperated goddess’s words exposed me. However, Lieselotte could not hear the truth, and looked depressingly hurt as she flashed me a weak smile. She went on in a tone that made it sound like she had everything figured out.

“You don’t need to bother with me any longer. All I ask of you is to continue being your dazzling self. I will love and support you on my own terms—that alone gives me life.”

Lieselotte heaved the longest sigh I’d ever heard. I knew that I had to clear up this awful misunderstanding, but I couldn’t bring myself to interrupt her earnest affection. *How can you love someone as cowardly as me in the way that you do?*

Still, my intuition that this was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to hear Lieselotte’s true feelings was not so far off the mark. She’d been going on for some time under the assumption that her fondness for me was common knowledge, but I wouldn’t have even discovered that without the help of the gods’ commentary.

“So please—”

“Lieselotte.” I cut her off, turning her grimace into an expression of curiosity. “You think too highly of me.”

I rose from my seat and circled over to her sofa, sitting back down on her right.

“Your Highness? Wh-What are—”

As she tried to squirm away, I looped an arm behind her back to keep her close.

“Lieselotte, listen to me. I love you just as much as you love me.”

“Don’t toy with me! I don’t need your hollow affection to win against the Witch of Yore! Won’t you trust me? I swear that I will fulfill my role as your future queen!”

Lieselotte’s faith in me was depressingly low. She flailed about as she shouted, so I squeezed my arm tighter.

“Lieselotte... *Liese*.” My fiancée froze in place. “The truth is, I’ve always wanted to call you by your pet name, and envied Baldur when he spoke of you. And I would even prefer young Fabian to keep his distance from you. Worst of all, I can’t be genuinely happy for you when I see how well you and your new sister Fiene get along because of my terrible jealousy.”

I couldn’t tell whether I was hugging Lieselotte or she was clinging to me. I continued ripping my heart open for her to see.

“My honest feelings for you are all shameful. But with my position in society and all the expectations hovering over me, I don’t know how to express the ugly emotions I’ve hidden away...” *But I want you to see and accept me.*

I couldn’t bring myself to say the final bit—it was simply too humiliating. But Lady Kobayashee had said I regularly acted too cool, so perhaps it was fine. Before I could make up my mind, Lieselotte began to speak.

“I...I too was jealous of Fiene and Artur Richter. Fiene is so earnest in how she accepts your—*everyone’s*—kindness, and you never seemed at ease with me like you did with your true friend.”

“Then I guess we’re the same,” I said. I felt her trembling hands slip around my back.

“Truly? Your Highness, do you really feel the same way? Can I let myself believe that someone as wonderful as you...*loves me?*”

Everything, from Lieselotte’s delicate hands to her voice, was trembling. I

pulled her closer than ever and gave my answer.

“Believe in my love and believe in *me*. I adore you. I’m so grateful that you and I are engaged.”

Lieselotte shivered intensely. I could hear the tears in her voice.

“I’ve always, always dreamt that you would hold me dear, ever since we first met. All this time, I’ve yearned for your love.”

So that was the dream that the gods and her father mentioned. Lieselotte truly is the cutest—cuter than anyone or anything in the whole world.

On the verge of exploding with emotion, I tried to stand. With an unbelievable amount of strength, Lieselotte grabbed hold of the back of my head and stopped me.

“Oh no, what shall I do?” she asked.

I couldn’t understand why she’d stopped me or what she was saying. I tilted my head.

“I’m—I’m too embarrassed to look you in the eye... I don’t think I can let go anytime soon.”

...And hugging me isn’t embarrassing?

As I contemplated whether to point this out to see her reaction or simply enjoy the tender warmth between us, I heard the faraway voices of celebrating gods.

◆◆◆ Shout It Out!

On a Saturday midway through October, the pair found themselves back in the Kobayashi living room. After seeing her favorite couple in the game finally declare their love for each other, Kobayashi Shihono's hollering had transcended the realm of celebration. At this point, she was purely unintelligible.

"Yahoooooo! Yip-yip! Heeesh vrrroogaaa!"

Shihono hopped around the room like an excited bunny, grinning from ear to ear. The only thing Endo Aoto could glean was that she was happy. Any semblance of nuance was lost on him. He was at a loss for what to do, but tried saying something all the same.



“Yeah, that was great...but maybe it’s time to calm down a bit?”

Aoto’s attempt to bring Shihono back to reality was absolutely futile. Neither she nor her bizarre screaming showed any signs of slowing down.

“I guess she can’t hear me...” he said to himself.

Up until now, the two of them had exchanged high fives and cheered together when something good happened in-game. However, this time, Shihono had maxed out on excitement and began pumping her fists, jumping around, and twirling in a funky sort of dance. Seeing her go completely bonkers like this ironically shocked sense back into Aoto.

While Shihono was off in her own world, Aoto saved the game and turned off the console. After another ten minute wait, he began to feel uncomfortable. Seeing as this was Shihono’s home, there wasn’t any need to worry about others being weirded out by her peculiar song and dance, but Aoto was starting to feel a bit lonely. Just as he wondered if she’d ever regain sanity...

“Hee, hee, hoo—ah!” Shihono lost her balance and fell backward.

“Whoa!” As one might expect from a former baseball player, Aoto was quick to react. He managed to extend one arm behind her back and the other behind her thigh, supporting her fall.

Still, holding someone’s body weight while kneeling was too much for him. Failing to completely catch her, he slid and made a loud thud as they both smacked the ground.

“Sorry!” Shihono shouted, jumping out of his arms in a panic. She hurriedly looked him over. “I’m so sorry, Endo, I got carried away! Thanks for catching me—wait, you aren’t hurt, are you?! Are you okay?!”

Neither the arms Aoto had caught her with or his previously injured shoulder felt any worse for wear. However, his elbows and knees stung because they’d slammed into the floor. Even so, the soft sensation of holding Shihono—plus how she was all in his personal space to make sure he wasn’t hurt—left him unable to focus on the bruises.

Taking all this into account at once, Aoto decided to brush his pain and

embarrassment under the rug. He raised both hands to imply that he was fine and that she didn't need to touch him any more than necessary.

"No, I'm all right. Are you good, Kobayashi? More importantly, did you get it out of your system?"

"Yup!" she said with a cutesy smile. "I think I've calmed down a bit!"

Shihono's grin was back to normal. Seeing her abandon the crazed smirk she'd been wearing for the past few minutes was cause for relief.

"You know what? Actually, I'm not totally done yet! I'm just too happy! I mean, come *on*, ugh! I wanna tell the world that Liese-tan and Sieg are *finally* a thing! Or at least lemme tell everyone at school! I wanna go on air during the festival and scream at the top of my lungs!"

"Yeah, no. Nobody knows who Siegwald or Lieselotte are. That's a 'literally who' moment if I've ever heard one."

Shihono struggled to calm down and Aoto flatly refused her request. Roughly a month in the future, the Broadcasting Club planned to host a segment called *Shout It Out!* during their school's cultural festival.

On the first day of the festival, they would go around looking for students that wanted to get something off their chest on air. Then, they'd record an interview-style bit with members from the club, and eventually broadcast it to the school, as long as there weren't any content issues. Most people used the time to advertise for their class or club, but every now and again they had guests declare their love for the whole school to hear.

"Talking about two *video game characters* getting together is kinda pushing it. Besides, there's no way you could explain our situation."

Despite Aoto's measured response, he recalled that there was a boy who had gone on the show to talk about his waifu last year. Still, their own circumstances were too extraordinary to explain. He played around with the thought for a bit, but Shihono quickly moved on to a new suggestion.

"Mm, fine. Then let's do a radio drama of the scene! I'll write the script!"

The other event the Broadcasting Club was in charge of was a radio drama.

They had yet to choose what script they were going with. November also had a competition for new commentators, so the already unenthused members of their club had put off the extra work of producing a script for quite some time.

Shihono wanted to slot in the heartfelt scene they'd just watched, since they needed to choose something anyway.

"Wait," Aoto said in horror. "No, no, no, hold up. You want to do *this* scene? Seriously? I know everyone is just waiting around for somebody to do the scriptwriting, but...don't you think this is a bit of a sugar overdose?"

"...I guess it'd be a teensy bit embarrassing?" Shihono tilted her head in contemplation as she slowly regained her composure.

"Don't 'teensy bit' me. Reenacting *that* is a cruel and unusual punishment. Plus, if you suggest *this* story, then everyone will definitely force you into the main role as Lieselotte..."

Aoto did everything he could to try and convince her to stop. However, what he considered a bulletproof argument only caused the girl to think even harder.

"Hmm, then would you play Sieg with me?"

Suddenly, Aoto was made to weigh his sense of shame against the urge to stop anyone else from playing the role with Shihono. He knew it would be *incredibly* embarrassing. However, imagining her saying sweet nothings to someone else was even more unbearable.

"...Fine, but only if you play Lieselotte," he mumbled.

"Ughhh!" Shihono said, scratching at her head. "Should I?!"

"You're seriously considering it?! How badly do you want to show everyone your favorite ship?!"

"That's not it," Shihono said, shaking her head. "I really like your voice, Endo. It's deep, gentle, and has this oomph to it. I've wanted to record you saying lovey-dovey stuff to throw on a loop even before I scouted you—and I still do. So with this deal, I get to show off Sieg x Liese-tan *and* hear you say all the things Sieg did... I *have* to do it, right? This isn't the time for embarrassment!"

Shihono was in deep thought, and Aoto stared at her with mixed emotions.

He had no qualms about saying embarrassing lines if she wanted him to, but broadcasting that to the whole school was a separate issue. Frankly, he wasn't sure if he was physically capable of delivering lines as honeyed as Sieg's. The more he mulled it over, the more he respected the real prince that managed to say all that with a straight face.

"I mean," Shihono said out of the blue, "remember the sports tournament? A bunch of girls came up and told you how great your play-by-play was and how much they liked your voice. I'm not your only fan, so I think an audio drama with your voice would be in high demand."

Aoto blushed from the continuous compliments and averted his gaze. He mumbled, "It wasn't just me. People complimented your analysis and voice too."

"Huh? Did they?"

"Well, I'm not sure if you're aware, but you're popular to begin with."

"No way," Shihono said with a giggle.

"Yes way. Kobayashi, you're super cute *and* you're kinder than an angel. You're a million times more attractive than some guy with an okay voice. Besides, when people talk about that rumor, they always say it like, 'Really? Kobayashi and that Endo guy?'"

Aoto sighed and stared at the floor with all the energy of a deflated balloon. He was so caught up in what he thought to be a hopeless one-sided love that he totally failed to notice that he was already flirting with her.

Naturally, he also didn't realize that Shihono was overheating with a bright red blush—and he didn't even begin to consider why she hadn't denied any of the rumors floating around for the past two weeks.

Half a month prior to witnessing Siegwald and Lieselotte's episode, the high schoolers had been enjoying their school's intramural sports tournament. On this late September day, the two of them found themselves casting over the boys' basketball tournament's final match.

They hadn't planned to, of course. The duo had been watching the tournament from the broadcasting booth overlooking the gymnasium and were doing their usual commentary to pass the time. By chance, their club's advisor overheard them; the teacher thought they were so good that they ended up on the mic for the final game.

"I-It's finally time for the boys' basketball tournament finals! Our two teams are the first-year Class C and second-year Class E. No one could have foreseen that the third-years would miss out on this decisive match—just who will take the trophy home?! Ahem, I'll be your play-by-play host for the day, Endo. And joining me..."

"I'm Kobayashi on color commentary."

Aoto stuttered a small amount due to his nerves, but Shihono was perfectly collected. Their impeccable synergy caught the ears of all their listeners: while the play-by-play didn't always land the mark, there was a calm tidbit of analysis to fill any awkward gaps. Their commentary had been good enough to be worshipped as a feat of heaven in another world, and their classmates found it just as remarkable.

The final match of the basketball tournament had already drawn in a crowd. The addition of these two sportscasters brought nearly the entire student body into the stands.

"Oh my gosh, you two were great!" Shihono's friend had said. "The game was so much more exciting thanks to you guys. You were more in sync than a husband-and-wife comedy duo!"

It wasn't just their friends either—everyone who'd heard them shared the same opinion. As a result, Aoto and Shihono became school-wide celebrities as a commentator power couple. In fact, rumors of their relationship were so pervasive that even the *teachers* thought they were dating.

Shihono neither denied nor affirmed the rumors; she also did not comment on whether or not they pleased her. Aoto was so lost as to what he ought to do that he had ended up asking a friend for advice.

"Kobayashi and I *are* pretty close, and I'm mostly confident that she doesn't *not* like me. In fact, I'd go as far as to say she likes me, you know, as a person,

but...she doesn't see me like that, right? And I'm kinda hoping that maybe all the rumors will get her to think about it at least a little—but what if it makes our current friendship more awkward? Which do you think is more likely?"

"Can you shut up and go confess already?" Unfortunately for Aoto, his friend's advice was curt.

"Yeah, but I don't wanna lose what we have now, and I don't have a good 'This is it!' kinda moment either..."

Aoto trailed off into a mumble and his friend sighed. Alas, the cowardly boy couldn't bring himself to cross that final line.

By the end of October, the cultural festival was fast approaching. Shihono hadn't gone back on her word, and brought her own originally produced radio drama for the club to see. Her suggestion was gently rejected by the other members who said, "It's great, but I think we'd need something with more characters so we can all participate together." Still, Shihono seemed satisfied that she at least got the chance to show her OTP to her friends at the Broadcasting Club.

That being said, the gentle treatment stopped with Shihono. She was due to be the next club captain, and the retiring third-years all pampered her like their little sister.

"Don't use the cultural festival as your playground to flirt in public!"

"Are you *trying* to give us diabetes?"

"I can taste sugar crystals forming in the air every time I open the door to the clubroom..."

"You're 'not dating'? That's some kind of twisted joke, isn't it?"

"Stupid couples like you should burn—except Shihono. She's *my* bride!"

The day after Shihono's script unveiling, the upperclassmen of the club called Aoto out and began berating him. Tired of their badgering, he tried defending himself.

“So you want me to burn all on my own, captain? Also, I don’t think *I’m* the one who needs to hear this.”

“Shihonon’s a cutie. I can’t scold cuties. That’s why you’re the only one I can yell at, Endo!”

The former club captain unabashedly slapped Aoto in the face with her logical fallacy. Out of all the third-years, she was particularly fond of Shihono, and she wasn’t on the best of terms with Aoto as a result.

“I’d be willing to take this sort of abuse if I really had a girlfriend as cute as her, but we aren’t dating. Tell me honestly: do you genuinely think Kobayashi has a thing for me? Personally, I feel so friendzoned it *hurts*.”

The upperclassmen all averted their gazes in unison.

“Uh, well,” the old captain said clumsily, “she doesn’t *hate* you, I think. But I mean...I don’t think I’ve ever seen Shihonon hate anyone, so...”

Aoto took a step forward and stared into her eyes with grave importance.

“I know that much. It’s clear she doesn’t explicitly dislike me. The question is what comes next. Am I just one among the crowd, or do I have a chance?”

“Uh...” The girl took a long pause. “I dunno! Go get rejected already, moron!”

Irked, she threw a loosely bound booklet of papers at Aoto and fled the room. Aoto caught it and curiously flipped through while the boy that had served as the club’s previous vice-captain explained.

“That’s the radio drama we used when we were first-years. It’s a murder mystery on an abandoned island where the characters slowly start to dwindle. Back when we ran this, we played the first half, let our guests talk about who they thought the culprit was, and then played the second half. I doubt anyone outside the club remembers a minor story from two years ago, so you can reuse it. We’d like to see you change the culprit or something if you can find the time, though.”

“Whoa, thanks a ton!” Aoto was moved. “...Sorry for not realizing that you called me out to help us.”

“Don’t get it twisted. We’re all still mad about your PDA, so you’re playing the

first victim. I'll be looking forward to hearing you croak in the first act."

The rest of his upperclassmen nodded along, but Aoto smiled back at them.

At long last, the cultural festival had begun. The Broadcasting Club's members divvied up the roles between setting up a classroom for the radio drama, finding guests for *Shout It Out!*, and delivering standard PSAs.

That being said, the final ratio was quite lopsided. Not wanting to be in the public eye (especially with guests from outside of the school), the unmotivated members of the club all refused to manage the radio drama.

"You two are famous anyway. It won't be that bad—all you have to do is play the audio," they'd said, leaving Aoto and Shihono to handle the whole thing themselves. The only break they had scheduled was thirty minutes for lunch.

With thirty minutes to go until then, Aoto was already feeling exhausted. Truthfully, the other members had been right: the work wasn't that bad. The part that wore him out was shooing off all manners of playboys and flirts that came in search of Shihono. Experiencing her popularity firsthand had drained him of all his energy.

Aoto opened the classroom door to see out one batch of visitors and then welcomed in another. The first few minutes were reserved to quickly explain how the show worked, but the boy noticed a stunning young woman slip in during this time. With a fluffy and brightly colored perm, her most striking feature were the slender legs that poked out of her short culottes. The beauty looked around the classroom as if to search for something.

"Shihono!" A smile bloomed on the woman's face and she happily made her way over.

Shihono had been speaking with two middle school girls who planned on entering the school in the following spring. But when she heard her own name, she slowly turned to see who had called her.

"...Sis?!" Shihono said in utter shock.

“I’m here!” the woman said with a playful giggle.

“What do you mean you’re here?! Oh my gosh, why didn’t you tell me you were coming?!”

“I wanted to surprise my cute widdle sister!”

“But I have stuff to do here, so I can’t just—oh, oops.” Shihono paused her interrogation and turned back to the middle schoolers. “I’m sorry, you two!”

“I can take care of them.” Endo came over and offered a life raft. Even the two younger girls seemed relieved. “Kobayashi, go ahead and talk to your sister.”

“But...” Shihono’s eyes jumped from the middle schoolers to her sister, and then to Aoto. She didn’t get to think for very long before her sister’s attention turned to Aoto.

“Hey, you. Are you Shihono’s boyfriend?”

“Wha—no. I’m Endo Aoto, just a fellow member of the Broadcasting Club. The club captain—er, your sister—is always helping me out.”

Aoto bowed politely. In turn, the older Kobayashi started thinking. Her posture was the epitome of someone trying to drag something out of their memory.

“En...do? Oh, *Endo!* From summer brea—”

Shihono physically sealed her sister’s mouth with lightning speed.

“Oh, uh, yeah. I visited your home a handful of times... Well, honestly, I sort of lived there over the break. Sorry about that.”

While the woman hadn’t completed her sentence, the reference to summer vacation made Aoto feel a bit guilty. He hadn’t ever bumped into Shihono’s sister before, but that didn’t change the fact that he was a stranger that had practically been camping out in her living room.

After Aoto’s apology, it was clear that the older Kobayashi wanted to say something. Unfortunately, her little sister was clearly not in the mood. Shihono flashed Aoto a smile while still smothering the woman’s mouth.

“Don’t worry about it. Let’s just skip the formal introductions and stuff. I’m gonna go talk to my sister for a bit, so thanks for taking over!” Shihono was shoving her sister out the door before she was even done speaking.

“Uh...” Aoto was momentarily perplexed by the juxtaposition of Shihono’s graceful smile and terrifying forcefulness. Regardless, he moved the conversation along. “Sure, leave it to me!”

“Oh, and don’t you dare flirt with those girls just because they’re cute! I’ll be *right* back, okay?!”

“I wouldn’t anyway! And if any more weirdos come to hit on you, holler and I’ll be there!”

Listening to the two go back and forth, the older sister grinned. Her smirk was wide enough that it was visible even behind the hands holding her mouth shut.

At long last, their lunch break arrived. The two of them slipped away from the hustle and bustle to an empty classroom that their club was borrowing for the day. Shihono was the type to bring food from home, but Aoto had planned on buying something at the festival, and so he left the room. He casually walked around, making sure to choose a path without a crowd, when a voice suddenly called out to him.

“Heya, Endo!”

Aoto turned and bowed. He thought that Shihono had shooed away her sister a little while ago, but here she was.

“Ah, hello, uh...Miss Kobayashi. Um, Shihono is over there, back in that classroom.”

“No, that’s the thing. I’m not here for Shihono. In fact, if she sees me, she’ll get really mad. Actually, I think she’d get mad just because I’m still here at all! So, I’d rather you not go find her.”

Aoto tilted his head. He couldn’t imagine the kind Shihono being so stringent with her family, but then thought back to his relationship with his own sisters. At their age, it was harder *not* to fight with your siblings from time to time.

“Uh, sure,” he said, still a little confused. “So, do you need something from me?”

“Yup,” the woman said with a devilish grin. “Do you know what Shihono told me during summer break? ‘If you’re going out anyway, stay out until dinnertime.’ Can you blame me for wanting to see what kind of man my baby sister brought home while I was away?”

“That’s a provocative way of putting it...” In truth, all they’d done when he’d gone over was cheer on *other* people’s romantic pursuits. However, he didn’t know how to explain himself; after all, Shihono had probably chased out her sister to hide the strange circumstances of the game.

“Oh? Are you saying what happened *wasn’t* provocative? I’ll admit Shihono’s a bit childish sometimes, but I guess this means you’re just not that interested in her.”

Aoto had trailed off because he couldn’t tell the truth, and Kobayashi Senior filled the gap in conversation with another teasing smile. She’d seen right through him, and her playful attitude drew out a sigh.

“I’d say Shihono’s the one that isn’t interested,” he said.

“Aha, I knew it!” she said, laughing. “Which means you’re not *uninterested*—am I right, Endo?”

“...Am I that easy to figure out?”

“Kinda, yeah. But I wanna hear it straight from the source. You know, I’m in the mood for a passionate declaration of love. If someone makes one right now, I might just end up cheering them on forever!”

Seeing the older Kobayashi toy with him so merrily, Aoto heaved a long, long sigh. He hung his head for but a moment before mustering up his courage.

“Well, it looks like you already know this, but I’m in love. Sometimes I catch myself thinking, ‘How can you be so cute? Are you a literal angel?’ Both inside and out, I can’t imagine anyone that fits my tastes so perfectly. Basically, what I’m trying to say is... I’m unbelievably and hopelessly in love.”

“Oho ho! I see, I see. But Shiho—”

“Sis?!” Shihono shouted angrily from across the hall and began sprinting toward the two. With silent fury, she asked, “I said not to do this. Didn’t I?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the elder sister said. She hung her head low and was faintly quivering. “I’m sorry.”

Aoto couldn’t help but wonder how much of the conversation Shihono had heard. He was intensely curious about whether or not she’d heard him call her an angel that he was madly in love with, but decided that asking would only cause the current situation to worsen. Despite the cold sweat running down his back, she flashed her usual cherubic smile his way.

“Sorry about that, Endo. Did my sister say anything weird?”

“No, we just met up, actually. We haven’t even really talked about anything yet...right?”

Aoto glanced at the woman, who eagerly nodded along.

“Yup, that’s right! I was about to go home anyway, and I was just telling him about...how I graduated from this school!”

That was news to Aoto. Still, he nodded.

“Oh, that makes sense...” Shihono puffed up her chest a bit and added, “Our school might not be the best, but my sister managed to get into the same university as Kuon Kirise!”

“That’s incredible! Your sister’s amazing!”

Aoto felt like this was a broad departure from the rest of the conversation, but shamelessly latched onto his opportunity to escape. For her part, the older Kobayashi did the same.

“Yup, I’m amazing! ...Not that I’ve actually *seen* Kuon Kirise. Our campus is huge.”

“That has nothing to do with how incredible you are! I’m pretty sure your university is at least in the top three private schools in the Kanto region. Our high school doesn’t even have that many college prep courses, so that’s awesome!”

As Aoto showered the woman with exaggerated praise, she puffed up her

chest with a fittingly smug grin.

Kuon Kirise. The well-known actor was also a student at a famous private school in his hometown. Both his background and appearance were an exact match with “Kuon,” the final god hidden in *Magikoi*’s secret route.

Aoto and Shihono had met him once before. He’d rambled on about strange things and mistaken Shihono for his lover, Eve.

Ever since, Aoto had had a bad feeling about the young star. He feared that the man might interfere with their plans to create a Happy End to End All Happy Ends. Even if he didn’t, the fact that he’d mistaken Shihono for his lover made Aoto worry that he’d involve himself with her.

In the game, the divine Kuon appeared in every route except the Reverse Harem Route. After the Witch of Yore hijacked Lieselotte’s body and murdered Baldur during the Festival of Gratitude, the god answered Fiene’s heartfelt plea with a blessing.

Yet now they were no longer on a known timeline. What had happened to the original god? Despite all of Aoto’s worries, something told him that just speaking the divinity’s name would bring ill omen. In the end, he chose not to say anything.

Chapter 3: Preparing for the Festival

With less than a month to go, the Festival of Gratitude was fast approaching. I found myself sitting in the Riefenstahls' salon, blankly staring at the door. It had been violently slammed shut only moments ago.

"Your Highness, you and my sister finally saw eye to eye a few days ago," Fiene said in a hushed voice. "...Didn't you?"

"Supposedly so," I said. "Well, she's gotten a tad less prone to embarrassment when we're alone. But it seems that newfound confidence dissipates when there are others present. In fact, I feel like she might be even *worse* than before. To be fair, shame isn't exactly an emotion you can easily think your way out of, and she's cute that way anyhow. I think it's fine."

"I guess a calm and collected Lieselotte wouldn't be Lieselotte at all." Fiene laughed and nodded along. "...But what should we do about her dress?"

I was visiting today to decide on what Liese would wear to the ball at the festival. The girl in question had been here not too long ago, but Fiene and I had been too persistent in our pleading to see her in a dress. In the end, she ran off.

Knowing that the Witch of Yore was to resurrect on the final day of the Festival of Gratitude, Liese was adamant on being ready for battle. Instead of a dress, she wanted to show up to the dance in sportswear.

However, this would be my last opportunity to participate in the academy's festivities. Unable to deny my desires, I had implored my beautiful fiancée to wear a pretty dress—what's more, her little sister Fiene agreed with me. For whatever reason, that led to her fleeing the scene. Perhaps we'd been a bit too aggressive with our lavish words of praise.

"Hm," I mused. "It would be downright depressing to prepare something that she refuses to put on."

"Maybe she'd be fine with a dress so long as it's easy to move in," Fiene said. "Let's give up on trains and petticoats. How about an empire silhouette that

only goes down to the ankles—or even shorter on the front side.”

“Hrm... I suppose I’ll put in an order for something that won’t get in the way of her footwork, and ask the tailors to make it as easy to move in as possible.”

“Since she’ll be wearing heels, I wonder if there’s *any* dress at all Liese-tan could possibly fight in,” Lady Kobayashee said.

“And the scene shifts to the outdoors, so anything that’s too long will track through the mud,” Lord Endoh said. **“Does that only freak out peasants like us, or what?”**

Suddenly, the gods hopped into our conversation...which meant that my gods-blessed fiancée must have returned.

Knock knock knock.

“Excuse me,” Baldur said, opening the door without waiting for a reply. I’d been wrong; *he* was the carrier for our heavenly companions.

“Sir Bal?” Fiene asked. “Why are...oh, I know. My sister must have put you up to this because she didn’t want us to be alone.”

Baldur nodded casually. The branch family’s holding in the royal capital was right next door to the marquisate’s. To be exact, they were literally on the same plot of land. The young knight must have made his way over as soon as Liese had demanded him to.

“Your Highness, I bear a message from Lieselotte. She asks, ‘May I borrow a uniform from the royal guard?’ For the festival, I presume.” As Baldur gave his report by my side, I noted how his cousin had recently barred him from using her nickname.

“The royal guard?” Lord Endoh asked. **“What kind of clothes do they wear?”**

“It’s a military uniform!” Lady Kobayashee squealed in a frenzy. **“They have this all-white uniform with golden accents, and they march alongside the royal family all the time, so they’ve got all these fancy buttons and embroidery on them!”**

“Plus, they come with pants,” Fiene added. “The women’s version has a longer tail on the jacket, with slits for movement, right?”

I answered Fiene with a nod only to see Baldur do the same—at the exact same time as I did, no less. Feeling a bit awkward, I beckoned him to sit over by his lover, when the goddess’s voice exploded in my ear.

“I wanna see Liese-tan in a uniform! I know it’s not full-on cross-dressing, but I can’t pass up a chance to see a rare Liese-tan!”

Is this analysis or just personal greed? Regardless, I would be lying if I said I didn’t want to see it myself. Clearly, following the goddess’s will was good prudence.

“I agree. The royal guard’s uniform is fit for combat and completely acceptable in a social setting. Instead of merely lending Liese one, I’ll have one custom tailored for her size.”

With everything set, Fiene nodded along happily and Baldur sighed in relief. I couldn’t begin to imagine how thoroughly my fiancée had chewed him out before he had come here.

“Will you be wearing the same, Fiene?” he asked his lover.

Now that he mentioned it, we’d been so engrossed with Liese’s dress that we hadn’t given Fiene’s attire any thought.

“No way. I’m so tiny compared to Lieselotte that pants wouldn’t look good on me... Honestly, I’m so unfashionable that I don’t really want to wear the same thing as my sister. Plus, I learned my lesson about wearing white and gold, so I’ll pass!”

Fiene was mildly incoherent as she stumbled through her words, but there was only one thing stuck in my mind: *why is my Liese so unbelievably cute?*

“Hey, who woulda thought she was hiding her dere side in a place like this?!”

“Liese-tan could’ve chosen to wear a normal knight’s uniform like her father or cousin, but went out of her way to ask for one from the royal guard. Naturally, the only explanation is her love for Sieg.”

Gods, I knew it.

“In that case, would you like to wear one of the dresses we considered earlier,

Miss Fiene?” I pushed on with a friendly smile to overwrite the unbecoming smirk that nearly made its way to my face.

“Um...” Fiene’s head tilted to one side and then she began thinking out loud. “The issue is that my style of fighting means I need something that’s even easier to move in... I won’t be able to fit in kicks with the ideas we came up with for my sister. I think I’d like to wear pants too, but maybe something baggier so my stubby legs don’t get highlighted as much.”

“Like a rich noble boy? Or an Arabian style? Pirate pants? Oh, maybe kind of like a magical girl?” Lady Kobayashee began muttering with all the gravity of a general preparing for war. I couldn’t tell whether she was running through everything that came to mind, or if she wanted to see Fiene wear all of these different outfits.

“In the game, Fiene wore a knee-length dress with boots, yeah?” Lord Endoh said. **“I feel like that’s good enough.”**

“Oh, that was cute too. There’s actually an event where characters can send her a more traditionally fancy dress, but her standard one would definitely be easy to move in. Since it’s nice and casual, I think it’d fit her well!”

Apparently, the goddess wasn’t *that* invested, as she immediately okayed her male counterpart’s suggestion.

“Then let’s do that,” Fiene said with a nod. “Magicombat Dress: Commoner Style Edition, here we come!”

I had exactly zero idea what a “Magicombat Dress: Commoner Style Edition” was, but the task of turning her request into a real product fell to House Riefenstahl’s designers. I decided to leave it to them.

My irresponsible train of thought was cut short when Fiene suddenly turned to me with a worried expression.

“Oh, but I’m not sure if that would fit in with the crowd. Do you think that would be okay?”

“Ah, most people do dress formally, but...there are some hooligans who come in outlandish costumes, so you’ll be fine. The after-party for the Festival of Gratitude only admits students and staff, meaning that it isn’t all that stuffy.

Feel free to do as you like, Miss Fiene.”

I could see her shoulders loosen up as I answered. Although she still seemed to have her fair share of doubts, there were none at the academy who spoke ill of her at this point.

Truthfully, there had been some vulgar individuals who’d derided her as a “mere commoner” in the spring. But I had publicly declared my friendship with her, and Liese had secretly cleaned up all who dared to slander her—though this latter point only became clear after the two tied the bond of sisterhood.

Combined with Fiene’s impressive strength and friendly nature, she now had friends in every part of the school. Besides that, as the daughter of a powerful marquis, *she* was the trendsetter. The Magicombat Dress: Commoner Style Edition could very well become the next big fad...even though I still had no clue what it was.

“All right, with our styles generally settled, I’ll leave you two to discuss how you’d like to coordinate colors and such. I think it’s about time I go check on Lieselotte.”

I rose from my seat. Fiene and Baldur exchanged glances and smiled bashfully.

“Lieselotte is... Ah. She’s in her room, and she’s obviously moping.”

Lord Endoh checked on my fiancée for me, and I couldn’t help but laugh at his report. *I guess I’d better hurry then.*

“Cheering up Liese-tan is sure to be a better use of your time than getting in the way of Fiene and Bal’s flirting. Get going!”

“W-We aren’t going to flirt!”

Fiene raised her voice with a blush at Lady Kobayashee’s teasing. However, Baldur was unable to hear the goddess and was clearly confused.

“What’s wrong, Fiene? ...Are you copying Lieselotte?”

His question was the final nail in the coffin, sealing her lips away under a bright red face. In fairness, hearing her claim that they weren’t going to flirt unprompted signaled that she *did* want to flirt as soon as I left—in a very tsun

de rais manner, no less.

I wouldn't want to get in the way of that, I thought, and I slipped out of the salon.

The festival was only a week away. Long after classes had ended, there was no one to be seen in the campus's rear garden. Only Liese, her father—in this case, I ought to refer to him by his official title as warmaster—and I were left. We were planning the security detail for the night of the dance.

“Let me confirm once more,” the general said. “You’re absolutely certain that the Witch of Yore is going to appear here in this yard?”

“No doubt about it,” Lady Kobayashee said. **“The witch should be sealed away in some ruins right under this garden.”**

Of course, General Riefenstahl couldn't hear her answer, so I echoed it for him.

“The heavens state that the Witch of Yore is imprisoned in a ruin buried beneath our very feet. I doubt there will be any way for her to appear elsewhere.”

“In which case,” Liese said, “we have plenty of room. What do you say we call in the whole of our forces here?”

“No,” her father said. “We can't ignore the possibility that she'll escape or take one of our men hostage. Further, we'll need to keep a reserve of forces to protect the students and staff.”

“Our teachers can all handle themselves,” I said. “Some regularly patrol the academy anyway, so I doubt they'll need much help. How about...”

We continued our discussion for some time. Eventually, we decided that only a handful of people were to be present: Artur, Baldur, Fabian, and I (who the gods referred to as the game's “heroes”) would be joined by Fiene and Liese (the “heroine” and “villainess” respectively). We comprised the team that had once slain the witch in the gods' vision of the future. Lastly, General Riefenstahl would lead twelve of his finest troops to round out our forces.

“Hey, I’m really getting the feeling that this is overkill... I’m pretty sure Fiene’s strong enough to do this all by herself, you know?”

As us three mortals were putting the finishing touches on our positions, Lord Endoh suddenly brought up his concerns.

“Overkill is the best kind of kill! The Witch of Yore feeds on despair and eats away at people’s souls, so she’ll grow stronger and stronger if we let her. The best play is to beat her to a pulp with ungodly firepower as soon as she shows up! ...I think. Besides, Fiene only beat her one-on-one because she could sink her fist into Liese-tan’s body, and the witch won’t have a physical form this time. Plus, Bal still died during that fight. If we want to keep everyone safe, all of our planning is absolutely necessary! ...I think.”

Lady Kobayashee’s tiny voice when she said **“I think”** betrayed her usual confidence. It was plain to see she wasn’t wholly sure of herself.

“I can’t get over the feeling that we’re just bullying her...” Lord Endoh was clearly unconvinced, judging from how doubtful his tone of voice was.

“N-No, come on, we even gave up on Professor Leon! And putting all that aside, the witch was the one who bullied Liese-tan first. Just that she attacked our adorable future queen is reason enough for the whole kingdom to rise up against her! See? It all makes sense!”

I can’t disagree with that. The goddess’s words profoundly touched me, and I nodded to show my approval.

“Let us place Cecilie by Fabian.”

Out of nowhere, I heard Liese mention a peculiar name. Up until now, I’d only been half paying attention, but I now butted in to the father and daughter’s conversation.

“What?” I asked, unable to believe my ears. **“You mean little Cecilie Riefenstahl is coming as well?”**

“Indeed,” my fiancée said matter-of-factly. **“Not too long ago, Cecilie was inducted into the knights by trial of combat. Although she is still in training like Baldur, she is a proper soldier in her own right. We’re planning to place her by Fabian’s side as one of his bodyguards.”**

I was bewildered beyond belief. The trial of combat was an alternative to the standard recruitment examination. It required a challenger to duel five ordained knights and win the *majority* of their matches. Furthermore, this special procedure required the king himself to sign off on their character.

“The youngest daughter of House Riefenstahl is only *ten*,” I said in shock. “What in the world is my father thinking, recruiting little Cecilie like this?”

“Holy moly, she’s part of the ‘twelve finest troops’ that the general was talking about.”

“Remember what Liese-dad said? ‘I’ve chosen twelve of my best—I can assure you both of their skill and mental fortitude.’ I know we’re the ones pulling out Fabby-boo when his twelfth birthday is right around the corner, but I don’t know if a ten-year-old is gonna be that strong, especially mentally.”

My head was already in my arms, but hearing the gods only worsened my fears.

“Should I go and ask my father to rescind her knighthood?” I muttered to myself.

“Your Highness,” General Riefenstahl said, “there is no need for you to worry, and even less to blame His Majesty. We’re simply letting my daughter have her way.”

“But...”

“Cecilie has no qualms about laying her life on the line to stand by Fabian—in fact, I’d wager that she’s excited to face a foe so powerful. We can vouch for her skill, and we’ve drilled it into her that she has no one else to blame should she fall in battle. There isn’t anything to worry over.”

The man’s reasoning seemed cold to me, but Liese was completely supporting him.

“But... Wait, have Cecilie and Fabian been engaged?” I asked. I could understand her willingness to brave danger if it was for the sake of someone she loved.

“It is all but confirmed,” Liese said. “Young Fabian is still somewhat hesitant, but Cecilie is, shall we say, ambitious? For some time, she has pined for the strongest husband in the world, and I very much doubt she’ll let go now that she’s found him. As far as the festival goes, she said, ‘I’m going to marry Fabian and protect him forever. If I can’t, I’d rather die.’ She is, well, eager if nothing else... Truthfully, I had no idea that my youngest sister could display such passion.”

Faced with the fiery resolution of a ten-year-old, I was struck speechless. In response, the general heaved a tired sigh.

“I know Your Highness may think it ridiculous for a girl so young to say such things. Yet the thought that something is too early for a child is just the misguided belittlement of us adults. Children do their best to think about the world in their own ways, and often surprise us with what they can accomplish. Frankly, I didn’t even believe that she could overcome her trial to become a knight, but she proved me wrong with her own strength. There isn’t anything left for me to say to her.”

The father paused for a moment. His smile was tinged with melancholy as he continued.

“When she was born, she was so lovely yet fragile. Every parent bears that memory and tries to protect their children forever, but eventually the time comes when they can stand on their own. As lonely as it is, that’s how things are meant to be. The twins are still off playing without a care in the world, but my youngest seems intent to prove herself.” General Riefenstahl glanced at Liese. “Well, we’ve known for generations that our flock can’t give up on whatever they fall for. Our ancestors tore past every obstacle in their path to march straight toward their goals, and we’re no different.”

I had no mind to deny that House Riefenstahl was full of single-minded people.

“Yep, Liese-tan’s the prime example, but I feel like all the Riefenstahls are kinda heavy-handed with their love.”

Agreed. Personally, my mind had gone to their long history of loyal service to the kingdom, but the goddess graciously brought my attention to my lovable

fiancée.

“I suppose you’re right,” I said. “Liese loved me for over a decade—ever since first meeting me at five years of age.”

“Wha—?!” Out of shock, Liese lost her ability to speak.

“Exactly,” her father said with a nod. “Cecilie is far more innocent than Liese ever was. At the time, my eldest was prepared to kill anyone that stole your heart and end her own life at the same time. You have no idea how anxious I was, praying that she wouldn’t do anything ridiculous. To see you speak of her so fondly now... Your Highness, I have nothing but gratitude for your benevolence.”

“In the game, she tried to kill Fiene, died, and was a proper villainess. Spot on!”

“The game’s events were primarily because of the witch’s emotional manipulation, but I’ll admit that her rivalry with Fiene was at kill-or-be-killed levels. But let me mention that she never bullied Fiene from the shadows like a coward, even before the witch stole her body. I can’t deny that she was a bit mean with her words and actions, but it was all in the name of love.”

The general, god, and goddess each put the absurd gravity of Liese’s love to words. Despite the heavy load, it just made me happier. To be loved so deeply was blissful—to think that, without the gods’ help, I would have never believed it.

“I’m truly thankful that we could get our feelings through to each other. Thank you for loving me up until now, Liese.”

I took her hand and placed my lips on the back of her palm. Her expression was a mix of frustration and embarrassment. It was difficult to put into words, and she soon began to let out a groan.

“Ugh, hnnng...” Liese’s gaze swam around, looking for a place to rest. Eventually, she glared straight at me. “Your Highness!”

I felt bad, hearing her shout so angrily. I’d overstepped my bounds by teasing her so much in front of her father...or so I’d thought.

“What do you mean to suggest by saying I loved you for over a decade in the *past tense*?! What do you mean, ‘up until now’?! Why are you sealing my feelings away in yesteryear without my approval? Do *not* belittle my love! Even should you ever grow to lose interest in me, I will love you for the rest of my life. No matter what kind of horrible plot or terrible deed it takes, I refuse to ever give up my position as your wife!”

“The *tsundereally-pissed* makes a glorious return!”

“Liese-tan says she’ll do terrible things, but she’s too nice for that. She didn’t do anything violent until the witch stole her body in the game, so I think the worst she’d do is challenge someone to a duel.”

...Oh, I can’t take any more.

“Wha—um, Your—wait! Stop!”

The onslaught of my adorable Liese and the commentary explaining her behavior caused my emotions to burst through. I hugged her tight, which made her shout at me in a panic.

“We may be the only ones in this yard, but m-my *father* is right here! Please, calm yourself!”

Her tone was very stern, but she didn’t try to push me away. It made it harder for me to pull myself off.

“Your Highness,” the general said quickly, “I shall see myself out. I will report to the guard station and explain our plans to the rest of the knights. Farewell!”

Thinking his actions strange, I snuck a peek at him. He was already marching off. My curiosity got the better of me, and I accidentally muttered, “I thought a father would want to stop something like this.”

Over his shoulder, he said, “Your intimacy is for the good of the nation! At any rate, I’ve given up on Liese since she was five!”

Oh, I remember. Once, at a banquet in the palace, I’d seen the general crying to my father. “I have *four* daughters, and not a single one ever said they wanted to marry me...” At the time, those around us managed to console him by saying things like “That’s just how girls are,” or “Don’t worry, you’ll be surprised by

how much your grandchildren will love you!”

“Y-Your Highness! I’m, um, I’m hot!” Overloaded with embarrassment, Liese began to wriggle around in my arms. I didn’t mind letting her go, but that alone would leave a hollow space in my heart.

“Sieg,” I whispered.

She froze.

For the umpteenth time, I begged her, “Liese, please. Won’t you call me ‘Sieg’? I want you to always call me that, but can you at least start with when we’re alone?”

I’d also told her to forgo formal language, but to no avail. My dearest fiancée was just too shy to acquiesce to my requests. While I found it cute when she got *tsun de* really upset, I wished that she would be a bit truer to herself—if not at all times, then at least when she was with me.

Frozen and silent in my arms, she finally took the hint.

“...It’s embarrassing, and my heart is about to explode. So won’t you please let go of me...*Sieg?*”

For the first time, she called me by my name. For the first time, we were on equal footing. Slowly, slowly, *slowly*, I pulled away from the collar I’d nestled into.

Although Liese was clearly relieved, I sensed a faint loneliness as well. The air filling the newly made space between us felt cooler than usual, and I was moving before I knew it. Right before I pulled away entirely, I shifted course: my lips made their way to her cheek. The gentle peck barely even touched her skin.

“Hngh! Sieg!!!”

I had never known that human beings could blush as vividly red as Liese was now. She shouted and tears were beginning to well up in her glaring eyes, but she was just so adorable. I couldn’t help myself.

I was laughing as I raised both my hands in surrender. The girl who’d held me and me alone in her heart since the day we first met looked up at me in frustration; my lovely, cute, and beloved Liese.

An attack on my adorable future queen truly did warrant the whole kingdom rising up to protect her. The goddess had been right all along. Overkill was the best kind of kill. No matter how menacing the foe, I swore to bring down anyone that dared to try and pry us apart.

◇◇◇ Lieselotte's White Flower

Lieselotte was six, and Siegwald was eight. A year after they had first met, the two were officially engaged on a fateful autumn day. Then, a few days later, Lieselotte and her father made their way to the royal palace.

As she was betrothed to the crown prince, the girl was to begin her education as the future queen. Thus, they were there to visit Tiana, the crown princess and mother to Prince Siegwald.

Knowing that the children were still young, Tiana wished to keep stiff formalities to a minimum, and invited everyone to join her in the castle garden.

"Allow me to formally introduce my eldest daughter, Lieselotte Riefenstahl."

As the marquis beckoned her forth, the little girl stepped out from behind him. Trembling with anxiety, she bent her knees and bowed her head in an awkward curtsy.

The king and marquis followed with formal introductions of their own. The whole time, Lieselotte was petrified. But then, a woman hugged her out of the blue.

"Everyone here is family or will be one day, and today's meeting is a relaxed, private affair. Don't stiffen up like that, sweetheart. It's nice to meet you, Lieselotte. I'm Tiana, Siegwald's mother."

The smiling princess stole away Lieselotte's gaze. She had luscious chestnut hair and light brown eyes that almost shimmered gold in the sunlight. What was more, the graceful lady had a charming smile, just like the prince Lieselotte loved so much.

Now Lieselotte was frozen in reverence instead of shock. But another, smaller silhouette then called out to her.

"This is our second time seeing each other, right? Ahem, I'm Siegwald. It's nice to meet you!"

When Siegwald paired his brilliant smile with his mother's, Lieselotte could hardly look without squinting. Tiana noted the girl's reaction and faint blush, and she let go with a happy smile. The crown princess was so happy with how they got along that she decided to give them a little push.

"The men will go on and on, so how about you two go off and play? Sieg, be a dear and show her around."

"Okay! There's a pretty flower over there that has the same color as your eyes. Let me show you!"

With a twinkle in his eye, the young prince tried to lead Lieselotte by the hand. He'd done so the first time they met—in fact, they'd held hands that entire day. And so, he didn't even think about it when he tried to do so again.

"Okay—ah!"

Yet as Lieselotte reached out to take his hand, her father's teachings sprang up in the back of her brain: *"To show favor is to show desire. Perhaps a desire for love. Perhaps a desire for special treatment. On the other hand, if you can resist these expectations, then you shouldn't need to express your favor. I know you're engaged to him now, but he's still far above you in stature. Keep these things in mind."*

As a loyal retainer to the crown, Marquis Riefenstahl had intended to quell his overeager daughter's enthusiasm. He knew that a young girl would not understand all that he meant, but hoped that she would understand by the time she rose to the throne.

In a cruel twist of fate, his words of wisdom had morphed in Lieselotte's mind to become a curse that would bind her for years to come...

"No!" Lieselotte screamed, slapping away Siegwald's hand.

"Huh?" The prince stood in utter shock. He stared at his own hand. The tears forming in his golden eyes drained all the color from Lieselotte's face. "...Why? But we held hands last time... You even said you liked me..."

Hearing Siegwald mumble sadly worsened Lieselotte's complexion further. She began to tremble violently. The first time they'd met, her father had not yet tightened the bolts on her heart; she had been free to say what she believed.

However, now Lieselotte knew that had been a mistake. She loved him, but she wasn't supposed to tell him that—but also, she didn't want to hurt his feelings. The various things she had to juggle got tangled up until she was too confused to make sense of them. In a fit of perplexity, she shouted the first thing that came to mind.

“I... I don't like you at all!”

And so, in the autumn of Lieselotte Riefenstahl's sixth year, she grew her first thorn as a tsundere. Such was the beginning of a long, ten-year love story fraught with misunderstandings.



Marquis Riefenstahl quickly scooped up his hysterical daughter. Lieselotte clung to him, repeating, “No, no! I didn’t mean it!” over and over again. After a feverish apology, the man swept his daughter away from the scene.

“Mother,” Siegwald asked, “did I do something wrong?”

Tiana couldn’t help but giggle from seeing her son look so forlorn.

“Liking someone as a friend and liking someone that you’re going to marry is different. You might like someone a lot as a friend, but then feel very differently if they asked to marry you. I think Lieselotte suddenly started thinking about that and got a little shy, is all.”

Tiana continued giggling, but Siegwald didn’t seem to understand. He tilted his head and looked at her blankly.

“Basically,” she went on, “you were just a teensy bit too forward for your second time meeting, Sieg. Trust me, I promise she’s not upset with you.”

“Really?”

“Really! Think about it: the marquis would never have agreed to let you two marry if Lieselotte didn’t like you. He might be the loyal blade of the kingdom, but the best of swords will point straight at the crown should we ever stray from a just path. Anyway, you two are going to be together for years and years. Don’t worry and get along little by little.”

Hearing his mother speak with such confidence slowly put a smile back on Siegwald’s face.

“You’re right, that makes sense! Now that I think about it, it’s rude to grab a lady’s hand without saying anything!”

“Mm-hm,” Tiana said with a smile. “Do your best, my little prince.”

By this point, the sagacious queen had already figured out Lieselotte’s true feelings, and thought that her childish bashfulness was simply adorable.

Little did Tiana know, the two would fail to close the distance for years to come...and she would never have imagined the convoluted mess their

relationship would slowly morph into.

Three years had passed, and Lieselotte Riefenstahl was nine years of age. It was early autumn, and her hair was far longer than it had once been.

It was considered fashionable among the women of upper nobility to grow one's hair out to their hips. Some did so because it signified that they were wealthy enough to employ a stylist exclusively for hair care. Others followed the age-old tradition that said long hair warded off evil spirits. While there were many different explanations, the simplest and most influential one was that long hair was in vogue.

Tiana had recently ascended from the position of crown princess to that of queen consort, and she was now at the center of the kingdom. Those around her enjoyed themselves by styling her voluptuous hair in all sorts of beautiful ways. Naturally, the rest of high society followed suit.

Lieselotte's mother was not one for trends or fashion. To her, hair was nothing more than a nuisance that got in the way of painting. Lieselotte had long followed suit and kept her own hair at shoulder length, but the sight of Tiana's elegant locks had stolen her heart. Ever since their first meeting, the girl had been growing out her hair; it now sat right around her waist.

"Lieselotte, dear, I see you've curled your hair today," Tiana said with a smile. Her student had entered her room today with long, curly rolls.

"Um, well..." Lieselotte's cheeks grew pink and she averted her gaze ever so slightly. "His Highness said you looked pretty when you wore your hair like this the other day, so I tried copying you."

Tiana squinted. She could hardly bear the girl's adorable shyness. However, that begged the question: why was she so sincere when Sieg wasn't around, yet so untrue to herself when he was?

The two children were on the cusp of puberty, and their relationship was beginning to show its quirks. Siegwald was steadily beginning to understand the difference between sexes, and Lieselotte was mentally twisting her first love at

every turn. Tiana couldn't help but worry as she watched the pair drift further into the realm of distant politeness.

"You look absolutely precious," the queen said. "You're incredibly cute, but..." *Why don't you show my son how cute you are?* Unable to put this question to words, Tiana sighed.

"Is there something wrong with my hair?" Lieselotte asked, fretful.

"Um..." Tiana stared at the girl in deep thought. Eventually, she decided to smile her worries away. "No, dear, I just thought that your head seemed a little lonely. Let me see—how about something like this?"

The queen was struck with a wonderful idea. She plucked a single flower out of a vase decorating her room.

"What's that?" Lieselotte eyed the blossom curiously.

Tiana snipped the stem short with a playful grin. Then, she stuck it straight into the girl's hair.

"It's a present! Think of this flower as a good luck charm to make you and Sieg get along."

Lieselotte tilted her head. She had no idea what the queen was talking about.

"Okay, quiz time!" Tiana said. "We here in the royal family are bestowed something to symbolize ourselves. We put this symbol on all of our favorite things to show that they are ours. What do we call this symbol?"

"I know! It's a seal!"

Lieselotte answered right away and the queen showered her with applause.

"Correct! Then do you know what Sieg's seal is?"

"I do! It's a lirene! Even though boys usually don't use flowers as their seal, Prince Siegwald was born with the same hair and eyes as the Goddess Lirenna who gave birth to our world, so he was given her favorite flower!"

"Correct again! That was a perfect textbook answer, Lieselotte! Okay, last question: what kind of flower is a lirene?"

This time around, the answer did not immediately spring to Lieselotte's mind.

Slowly, she began to speak while she dove into her memory.

“Um, it’s really rare in the kingdom, and I haven’t seen one yet. I heard that they’re really common in the eastern countries, and that they can dispel magic. They’re supposed to be white, with five petals arranged like a pointy star, and...? Wait!” All of a sudden, Lieselotte realized that the description she was dragging out of her recollection matched the flower that had been poked into her hair.

“Hee hee, that’s right! This is a lirene. They’re supposed to be difficult to grow in this climate, but for some reason you can find them all over the palace gardens. I’m sure it has something to do with our royal family being blessed by the Goddess herself.”

“This is a lirene? So this is His Highness’s...”

Lieselotte blissfully traced the snowy petals.

Tiana was overjoyed that the girl liked it so much. “People do say that it repels magic, but that isn’t why I want you to have it. This is a blessing so you and Sieg will be able to get along.”

If she can’t express herself with words, actions will do, the queen thought.

Seeing a girl decorate herself with her fiancé’s royal seal was sure to get one hundred out of one hundred people to think the same thing: *she must really love her fiancé*. Whether Lieselotte understood that or not, her rosy cheeks were tugging up in a wide grin.

“I shall send you another should it ever wilt,” Tiana said. “But take this as an opportunity to practice your magic. Try cradling it in moisture and cool air to have it bloom as long as you can.”

“I-I’ll do my best!”

The queen affably snickered at the girl’s heartwarming enthusiasm.

From that day onward, the girl bound by a constant failure to express herself was always seen with her beloved’s seal in her hair. Wherever she went, she showed the world that her heart was taken. All the while, she truly believed in the charm that the boy’s mother had given her.

Unfortunately, there was an exception to every rule.

After finishing her studies for the day, Lieselotte was slated to partake in tea with Tiana and Siegwald. The prince was already waiting in the gazebo when the two ladies arrived. He began beaming as soon as he saw the flower in Lieselotte's hair.

"Wow, that's my flower!" As previously mentioned, one hundred percent of people would come to this conclusion, and Siegwald was no different. He eagerly expressed his unbridled enthusiasm.

"N-N-N-N-N-No!" Lieselotte stammered. More out of reflex than thought, the red-faced girl began spouting nonsensical excuses. "This is just a lirene! I know it *happens* to be your royal seal, but this is originally the Goddess Lirenna's flower, and it wards off magic, and it's for my magic practice, and Her Majesty gave it to me, so—so you're wrong!"

"Oh, okay..." Lieselotte's shouting had tempered Siegwald's excitement into a mere mumble. "Sorry, I should've figured. I'm really sorry, I didn't mean it. It's just that I put lirenes on things that are important to me, and I was kind of happy that we were matching..."

"I-Important to you?" Lieselotte held her cheeks in both hands and stared at the ground.

"Mm-hm! I don't go around putting it on just anything! There aren't that many things you'll be matching with, so feel free to keep wearing it...okay?"

Sieg hurried to try and calm her down. He was so panicked that he didn't realize he'd used the word "Mm-hm," which he'd been doing his best to stop using. In return, Lieselotte began awkwardly nodding without bothering to look up.

"W-Well, um, I s-suppose that matching flowers w-wouldn't be so bad. Of course not. As little as it means, we *are* engaged. Having the same flower as your seal isn't a problem at all. Lirenes are rare, but they're a popular design even among commoners—it's not like this is *just* your flower. Oh, and it protects me from magic! So I should keep wearing it."

"Mm-hm! And best of all, you look really cute with it! The white petals are so

pretty in your golden hair. You're closer to Lady Lireнна than I am. I'm sure the Goddess of Creation must have blessed you with her favor!"

"Th-Tha—um. Thank y-you, um, very much..."

Lieselotte was a vivid red by the time she managed to squeeze out the last of her thanks. On the other hand, Siegwald waited for her to finish with an innocent and thoughtless smile.

Tiana was watching the whole scene unfold a short distance away. She'd retreated from the gazebo with her trusty lady-in-waiting when she'd sensed that they were about to have a moment together.

Yet the garden was now filled with an indescribable mood. The queen furrowed her brow. Turning to the maid holding her parasol, she hid her lips behind a fan and began to whisper.

"Do you think Sieg might be a tad... Nay, do you think my darling son might be an *utter* idiot? How anyone could believe that to be a coincidence is beyond me... You don't think little Lieselotte *truly* believed that her excuses would work, do you?"

Wholly unable to accept that her son was not among the hypothetical one hundred people with functioning brains, Tiana couldn't help but disparage him.

"Ahem." Her maid first cleared her throat in an attempt to gloss over her employer's frankness. "Well, I admit that His Highness may be a bit dense. However, I believe he intentionally forgoes expressing personal opinion due to his constant social interactions as the crown prince. I can only assume this is his answer to the challenges of royal life, or at least a coping mechanism of sorts. Above all else, I surmise that in this particular case, it is simply because he is with Lady Lieselotte."

Tiana paused. Hearing her maid so sure of herself caused the queen to scooch even closer and whisper in the quietest voice she could manage. "...You know something, don't you?"

The servant considered for a moment whether or not she ought to tell Tiana what she knew. However, she quickly concluded that both her paycheck and oath of loyalty were tied directly to the queen, not the young prince. In fact,

she'd been serving Her Majesty since before the boy was born.

"Some days ago, the two of them received instruction in the blade from General Riefenstahl. At the time, His Highness confided in me, saying, 'Lieselotte is cute, smart, works really hard, and she's good at everything from the sword to the spear... She'll never like someone like me just because we're engaged.'"

"Ahhh," Tiana said with a grin. "A match made in heaven, I see. You're telling me my boy's the type to lose confidence in front of the girl he's truly in love with? ...My goodness! Why don't they just get married already?!"

Although the queen suddenly exploded in volume, her maid continued to whisper in her ear.

"You may be pleased to know that the two are already betrothed."

"It won't be long before I see my grandchildren!"

"Your Majesty, you're getting ahead of yourself."

"Oh, dear, silly me. The wedding comes first, doesn't it? We'll need to prepare a whole wagon of lirenes to shower them with!"

"Madam, that is still seven years away at the earliest. Marriageable age is sixteen."

"Too long! What will we do if someone swoops Lieselotte away in that time?!"

"I'm sure the lirenes will protect her. It is a crying shame that His Highness is the exception, but I doubt anyone else will fail to understand their bond after seeing the flower in the young lady's hair—much less make a move to disturb them."

The women had abandoned all semblance of secrecy. Both Lieselotte and Siegwald turned over to look their way; as Tiana gazed upon the two precious children, she began to see the outline of a happy future.

"Well," the maid said, "I suppose someone growing up on the outskirts of the kingdom with no concept of royalty or symbolism might not understand...but someone like that would never interact with the crown prince or the first

daughter of a marquis. So long as Prince Siegwald doesn't genuinely believe that Lady Lieselotte hates him, I'm sure it will all turn out fine."

These words filled the queen consort with confidence. Assured of a happy future, Tiana ran over to the children with a brimming smile.

Chapter 4: The Witch of Yore

The final day of the Festival of Gratitude was upon us, and Liese's hair had the same white flower in it as always. Although the Witch of Yore was due to resurrect later in the night, for now I waited on the sidelines in a ballroom full of dancing students.

My fiancée was wearing a uniform from the royal guard and had tied her hair high to keep it out of the way. A single lirene poked out from the base of her ponytail.

"M-My role today is merely to serve as your protector. With clothing like this, I cannot dance with you in good conscience. I, well... I refuse to act in a manner that may bring dishonor to your name. So, um..."

This little debate of ours had been continuing quietly in the corner of the dance hall. With my arms around Liese's hips and a smile on my face, I leaned in close to whisper directly in her ear.

"Liese, you are the most beautiful person in the world, no matter what you wear—and seeing you in this uniform is adorable in its own right. Above all else, this is my last year to partake in school festivities. Won't you please grant me one more memory to share with you?"

"The blushing Lieselotte falls silent! She held out for a good while, but it looks like this argument is coming to an end!"

"They say fondness of the heart is bondage of the mind, and besides, tonight's event isn't formal enough to worry about slandering the prince's name. Liese-tan should throw in the towel. She danced with Fiene in the game, and there are plenty of same-sex pairs throughout the hall. One couple in a tuxedo and military getup is nothing."

Hearing Lord Endoh and Lady Kobayashee, I glanced over at the ballroom floor. There were indeed several pairs of boys and girls gleefully dancing away with other boys and girls, respectively.

We were far from the likeliest to stand out, and societal shame was the least of my worries. I simply wanted to hurry over and show everyone around us how well Liese and I got along. To dance with her would surely be great fun.

“Oh, come to think of it, Fiene was really nervous earlier about this being her first time dancing in public. Liese-tan took her hand, saying, ‘Then allow me to be the one to judge how far you’ve come,’ and the two of them danced at home before coming here.”

I couldn’t let that slide. Lady Kobayashee’s news instantly split my heart open.

“So you’ll dance with Fiene, but not me...” My arms went slack, and I gazed into Liese’s eyes. Listening to my own voice, even I could tell that I sounded hurt.

“Wh-Why do you—in any case, that was simply to confirm that she wouldn’t embarrass herself. I didn’t mean anything by it. With our impending battle, this truly isn’t the occasion to let ourselves get too lost in merriment anyway, and...”

“They *really* looked like they were having fun at home, you know?”

“Plus, when they finally stopped, Liese-tan was all, ‘I suppose you pass,’ and Fiene blushed with joy. I could practically *feel* the lilies blooming in the room.”

The gods’ assistance let me see right through Liese’s excuses. I squinted my eyes in a sullen glare and she awkwardly averted her gaze. She had enjoyed herself before the ball, and she knew it.

“The witch isn’t appearing here at this very moment, is she? Tradition says that those who share a final dance on the last day of the Festival of Gratitude will be able to overcome the harshest of winters together. But as it stands, your last partner will be Fiene... I don’t think I can forgive that.”

I sighed, causing Liese to look to and fro, at a loss for what to do.

The Festival of Gratitude was a tradition to offer the plentiful bounty of the autumn harvest to the many gods that watched over us—the Creation Goddess Lirennia chief among them. Details varied depending on region and social status, and the academy began merrymaking earlier than most. It was seen by many as a practice run for the official event held in the royal palace.

Each fall, we gave our thanks for a bountiful harvest and another year spent with those we loved. Alongside that, we prayed to the divine powers beyond that we might all survive the harsh winter to come, and the superstition of the dance was a direct result. Surely even the silliest of hooligans would take to the floor with their chosen partner for the final song.

“Um...” My stubborn fiancée continued her mumbling. “But Fiene is dancing with Baldur as we speak. Thus, our mere practice session at home is sure to be overwritten, and, well...”

I’d been staring at her for some time now, but I finally looked away. I made sure that my downcast eyes seemed as sad and hurt as I could possibly manage.

“Ah! ...V-Very well. Let us dance, just for a short while.”

Liese’s reluctant approval immediately brought back my smile. I knew she was kind; perhaps prodding at her sense of guilt was better than trying to convince her with reasonable arguments.

“Only for a short while! Am I clear?!”

I avoided giving a definitive response and led her to the center of the room with a smile.

“Whatever the case,” I said, “we ought to hurry and dance. It seems like we’ve been holding up the crowd.”

As the crown prince and the daughter of our kingdom’s warmaster, we were the most prestigious couple in the room. Although our teachers had told us not to worry about etiquette in this casual setting, there were more than a few people waiting for us to take to the floor before joining in themselves.

Finally noticing their presence, Liese closed her mouth. She followed my lead with all the elegance in the world.

After one song, I could feel the crowd around us ease up. Liese tried to return to the edge of the room, seeing as our “short while” was up, but I didn’t let her go. I continued my steps to the music without any hesitation; she had no mind to embarrass me, and entrusted her body to me.

“Liese...” As we slowly moved in correspondence with the second song, I asked an all too familiar question. “Are you really coming to the yard with us?”

“Of course,” she said without skipping a beat. “The Witch of Yore and her mental attacks did not instill me with fear—they roused the urge to cut her down with these very hands.”

We’d gone through this routine countless times now. With the upcoming battle now soon to start, I couldn’t help but wish for Liese to remain in the safety of this ballroom. I could no longer quell the rising fears within me. I continued thinking of ways to convince her to stay behind, but she interrupted my train of thought.

“Above all else, I...I wish to be with you, wherever you go.” Liese spoke without a hint of shyness. “To wait for you alone is a fate far more terrifying than to face her with you.”

I guess that’s fair.

If Liese were ever to march into danger, I would never allow myself to sit in the cradle of safety. The whole kingdom could tell me to stop, but my position as a royal or the crown prince would never be enough to let her go alone.

I agreed with Liese’s resolution. At the same time, it caused a warm fuzzy feeling to spring up in my heart and curl my lips into a smile.

“Then how about we head there hand in hand? Just like the first day we met.”

“When we first met?” she asked, curious.

On our first meeting, I’d spent an entire day holding Liese by the hand. She had been only five at the time, so I couldn’t fault her for forgetting. At that point, I hadn’t known she was to become my future bride—in fact, my parents hadn’t either.

I hadn’t taken her hand out of obligation, but out of a purehearted desire to continue being with her. I had acted the part of a prince because I wanted to catch the eye of the cute girl who’d called me one. I had smiled for her just because she had seemed nervous.

Alas, our relationship had twisted out of shape by the time my princely

mannerisms and crowd-pleasing smile had become muscle memory. Liese's thorns were so sharp that I had genuinely believed she did not like me. In fact, because of my misunderstanding, our families had rushed to put a date on our wedding plans.

Seeing Liese furrow her brow as she attempted to recall our first meeting was adorable; her put together military garb was as charming as it was new.

Lieselotte Riefenstahl had been, was, and would always be cute. I wouldn't have ever realized this simple truth had it not been for Lord Endoh and Lady Kobayashee's help. So I didn't mind if she'd forgotten our first meeting—though of course, I would be delighted if she did remember.

"You don't have to try so hard to remember. What I wanted to say is that you were cute at age five and are even cuter now, Liese." I snickered. "All that matters is that I remember."

"Wha—uh!" Liese was amusingly flushed. Her mouth froze, still open, until she lost her temper and shouted. "Oh, hnngh!"

Regardless of her embarrassment, Liese's dancing remained impeccable. I expected nothing less of her.

"Very well. Let us go hand in hand. Truthfully, I...would feel stronger that way too."

Liese's face was still red, her eyes were still downcast, and her voice was nigh unhearable. Even so, she spoke those words for me all the same.

"But you *must* let go once we arrive!" she said, trying to overwrite the mood of her previous statement. "I wield a spear, so you absolutely cannot get too close!"

"Sure," I said with a tender smile. "With all that's happening tonight, I can't argue with that."

Liese was perceptibly relieved. I decided not to tell her that I had no intention of letting her go on any other night.

After the Festival of Gratitude comes the relentless cold of winter. Far, far beyond, I want to still be with you. All I ask is to hold this hand tight forever—to

never lose sight of the joy your presence brings.

With my ardent prayer on full display, I continued to dance with Liese.



Naturally, Liese and I were the life of the event for the final song. She glared up at me a bit, but I didn't mind. There were swaths of girls swooning over my fiancée's attractive new outfit, and I wanted to show them all how perfect we were together.

"Whew, that was a feast for the eyes. Gosh, that was awesome... All right everyone, it's about time."

Lady Kobayashee's satisfied voice led me to look around the dance hall and lock eyes with Fiene. Having heard the same message, she nodded and came over to us with Baldur in tow.

"It's time, I take it?" Lieselotte said, still holding my hand. Her tone was utterly calm. "Fabian and Cecilie should already be posted in the garden with my father and eleven knights."

General Riefenstahl had been adamant on not breaking the convention of outsiders staying away from academy affairs. Instead of meeting us here, he was to wait for us in the yard. However, not all was as planned.

"Huh?" I said. "Why is Fabian of the Oltenberg Viscounty already there?"

"Apparently," Baldur said, "the girl he wanted to share his final dance with 'is waiting for him in the garden,' so he withdrew early. Or at least, that was the excited report I received from Cecilie."

"For real? What a heartthrob."

"Holy moly. I *knew* Fabby-boo would grow up to be awesome!"

It seemed the younger duo were getting along well. Secretly, I felt relieved. *Thank the gods I don't have to be on edge when he's with Liese anymore.*

"Ugh, I'm surrounded by lovebirds," Art said. "Get me *out*!"

My best friend made his grumpiness easily known as he entered the scene. The Festival of Gratitude was also a sacred holiday, and he was wearing his white priest habit in honor of the heavens. The stoic clothes were at total odds with the gaudy pink-gold of his hair, especially with the red highlights running through his locks. His sulking frown only worsened the mismatch.

“Art, this is what you get for fooling around so much.”

As I spoke, I led our assembled team out of the hall and toward the garden. Art hurried to line up beside me for his refutation.

“Don’t say that—the world is just so full of cute girls! And hey, I don’t fool around, all right?! *I’m* the one getting dumped most of the time. Lady Lieselotte and Fiene are both prime examples!”

Liese glared at him like he was the scum of the earth. I heard an “Uhh...” from Fiene as she hid in Baldur’s shadow.

“Perhaps,” Liese spat, “your frivolity in sweet-talking me and my sister is the very reason you fail to find a partner?”

“After all, neither Liese nor I had eyes for anyone else since we first met ten years ago,” I added with a chuckle. My comment caused my fiancée to fall into bashful silence; in contrast, my best friend clutched at his chest and looked incredibly pained.

“Cheating bad! Never!” For whatever reason, Lord Endoh’s voice sounded both strangely robotic and peculiarly musical.

“Good job, Sieg. Flirting at every given opportunity is one of the major parts of defeating the witch! Giving up on Professor Leon was a tough blow, but Liese-tan is so stable now that there’s nothing to fear!”

The goddess fanned the flames of my courage. As we marched toward the climactic battle, I tightened my grip on my beloved’s hand.

At long last, we arrived. We showed up on site with only ten minutes to go before the gods’ prophesied battle. Fabian, General Riefenstahl, young Cecilie, and eleven other knights were waiting for us with their arms at the ready.

The five of us also scattered to the positions we’d agreed on beforehand while bearing our weapons of choice. Art still looked a bit upset, but everyone was ready to give it their all.

Slip.

“Ah, it looks like I’ve made it in time.”

Suddenly, a masked man literally slipped out of the darkness.

“What the— Where did he come from?!”

Lord Endoh was stupefied, and I had no hope of answering his question. The man had appeared out of thin air without any semblance of warning. He’d practically bubbled up from the veil of night.

“You!” a middle-aged soldier barked. “Identify yourself!”

“Ah, well... I wonder, who *am* I?”

The man tilted his head. His lanky frame stood at about 175 centimeters or so, and his hair was chestnut brown—but most distinctive of all was his bizarre mask. It was shaped like a snow white cat and only covered the upper half of his face.

He might have seemed alien to me at first glance, but he was more familiar than one might expect. The knights who didn’t recognize him were on full alert, but the younger soldiers—who had probably only graduated the academy a few years prior—joined me and the rest of the students in utter confusion.

“I am...let me think...hm. Call me Karlchen. Such a shame that I’m a cat and not a rat.”

The man’s smile was so similar to his usual facial expression that I didn’t need to see his eyes, and his bored voice was completely unchanged from his ordinary lectures.

“No, no, no, wait!” Fiene exclaimed. “I can see your squinty eyes through the mask, Prof—”

“Wow! Gee! I wonder whoever this could possibly be!”

I summoned all the air in my gut to cut Fiene off with the loudest voice I could muster. All at once, everyone present turned toward me. The younger members of our task force all knew exactly who the mystery man was, and they all had the same look on their faces. If stares could talk, theirs would all say in unison: *What the heck is this guy saying?*

Those who did not recognize him were all utterly perplexed.

I knew. Of course I did. How could I *not* know that the man was Professor

Leon in costume?

Why didn't he at least choose to wear a full mask? Why did it look like a cat? What on earth was he on about with rats? There were so many questions I wanted to ask, but I fought the urge and elected to announce my ignorance of who he was.

Some time ago, Lady Kobayashee had said, **"No one can find out about Professor Leon's powers."** I knew of his family history, and his theatrical entrance alone was enough to see the bigger picture. If Leon Schach could do *that*, he would certainly disappear without a trace.

Thus, I chose to feign ignorance with all my might. As the highest authority present, I acted out my part.

"On my name as the crown prince, I declare that I do not recognize this man. My loyal subjects, are there any among you who *dare* claim that I have empty sockets for eyes? Let only those who wish to slander the heir to the throne speak of his identity!"

I made sure to lock eyes with every single person during my speech. The confused faces slowly turned into acceptance—or at the very least, no one looked like they would pry any further.

"Ah! Gee! I don't have a clue who this man might be either!" Thankfully, Marquis Riefenstahl played along.

As both a general and the second-in-command tonight, his backing was vital. No matter what the so-called Mr. Karlchen decided to do, he would be written off as a cryptic stranger who nobody knew. If nothing else, I knew the knights would stay silent.

"Yes, indeed." Relieved, I continued my charade. "I'm sure Mr. Karlchen must have sensed the Witch of Yore's terrible presence and came running to help. That's right, he must be some sort of mage of justice!"

"Of course!" the general said, nodding. "Although we have exactly zero hope of ever discerning his identity, I'm sure Sir Karlchen is an upstanding man of great skill, wholly worthy of our trust!"

While everyone else was petrified with bewilderment at our exchange, one

person was smiling. In fact, he covered his unmasked lips and began trembling in laughter.

“Pft, pffft, ha, aha ha! Oh, goodness. Your Highness, you are such a good lad.”

“I see. By using Sieg’s power as crown prince, we can place a gag order so Professor Leon can fight without worrying about his identity!”

Hearing Lady Kobayashee praise me in awe was wonderful, but being laughed at by “Mr. Karlchen” himself was excruciating. I was so embarrassed that my cheeks were about to catch on fire. As improvised as it was, my acting was woefully inept.

Gods, make it stop.

“Anyway, this means we have the whole reverse harem roster! Sweet!”

Lord Endoh’s excitement helped alleviate some of the shame. He reminded me that to defeat the witch was to protect Liese and our kingdom. That awful farce had been a small price to pay for victory.

...Yeah, let’s go with that.

“Hm... But why did he decide to come join us of his own free will?”

Lady Kobayashee’s question got me to start thinking as well. I couldn’t think of any reason for our teacher to put himself at such risk for us.

“Ha, aha...phew.” Finally done laughing, the man looked straight at Fiene and smiled. “As I said, I am Karlchen. Consider me a...friend, perhaps? Yes, a friend—a standin or disciple, even—to a certain princess who bid me to come help.”

When Fiene had arrived at the ball this evening in her new dress, some of the staff who knew her mother had praised her as the second coming of the Fae Princess. She’d flashed them an adorable smile then, but now her face was scrunched up in perplexity.

“We have the full reverse harem crew and they’re all stronger than in the game, plus Liese’s dad is leading the finest knights in the whole kingdom to boot! I can’t think of a way *not* to win!” Lord Endoh’s voice grew weaker.

“...We really are just bullies, huh?”

“The crime of laying a hand on my Liese is grave. I would say we haven’t gone far enough!” I said, raising my sword with vigor.

“Anyone who dares to hurt my sister and try to steal her body is downright evil! We can kill the witch a hundred times and it still won’t be enough!” Fiene said, readying her bracers with a nod.

“That’s the spirit, you two! I doubt there’s any way for us to lose, but stay on your toes. Beat that witch down with everything you’ve got!”

Fiene and I nodded along with the goddess’s command. Ironically, the target of Lady Kobayashee’s blessing began angrily shouting at us.

“Sieg! Fiene! W-Would you *please* not spout such embarrassing lines in a moment as important as this?! To begin with, our opponent is the Witch of Yore. This battle isn’t about me, it ought to be about the good of our nation!”

“Don’t mistake me,” I said. “The kingdom is important. But as the crown prince, I should be holed up, away from the front lines. I’m here tonight as your future husband, ready for war because someone dared to hurt my beloved Liese.”

“I...um! I-I understand. If that is your will, Your Highness, then I swear on my post as your fiancée and on my pride as a Riefenstahl to protect you!”

Liese twirled her spear and steeled herself with renewed resolve. Something I said had lit a fire in her heart.

“There’s nothing stronger than a lovestruck maiden! Give it your all, Liese-tan!”

“Come forth, accursed witch! I shall strike you down so quickly that you won’t even have a chance to plague His Highness’s eyes!”

Lady Kobayashee and Liese’s voices echoed through the courtyard in harmony. What answered was a black fog that oozed out of the ground in the precise spot the gods had predicted.

“That’s the blight that surrounds the witch!” Lord Endoh cried. **“Be careful, you’ll get weaker if you touch it!”**

“Have Fiene and Art purify it!” Lady Kobayashee said.

“Art, purification magic!” I relayed the message to Art. He was one step behind Fiene, as she’d reacted to the initial divine order, but the two of them quickly bathed the area in holy light.

“And Fabby-boo should—oh, he already started casting! Nice! Everyone else is standing by until she appears, just like we planned! Oh, and Professor Leon’s fine on his own, since he’s resistant to the blight. In fact, his spells are really messed up, so don’t let anyone get in his way!” Lady Kobayashee ran through our strategy at lightning speed.

As she said, Fabian had already begun morphing his mana into a massive spell on the back line. On the other hand, Professor Leon AKA Karlchen had been standing right beside the witch’s spawning point. He alone had been immediately engulfed by the miasma as a result, but he was smiling without a care in the world. As a matter of fact, he was merrily humming as he prepared to counterattack.

“Nobody stand in front of Mr. Karlchen!”

I did my duty and notified the others, but no one had planned to step forward in the first place. Just looking at the black mist was enough to tighten up my chest, so none dared to join our masked friend. The fact that he was still breathing was unbelievable.

Fiene and Art used their holy powers to envelop us in a protective light. Slowly but surely, they pushed back all of the blight to the source. As they did, the air around us grew lighter and I could finally catch my breath.

But then, the miasma *moved*. The final remnants of the insidious fog balled up as if it were a living being, and flew straight at Liese.

“*Liese!*” I screamed.

“Lieselotte!” Fiene tried to reroute her purifying glow toward her sister, but it wouldn’t make it in time.

“Don’t toy with—what?!” Liese sliced through the ball of mist with her spear. The evil fog scattered, but a small bit managed to cling to her head.

“Liese!” I sprinted to her side.

“There isn’t any need to...huh?”

Liese tried to wave away the remaining blight and tell me not to worry. Instantaneously, her neatly tied ponytail burst to let her hair flow freely; the lirene that had been nestled within fell to earth.

“Ah... No, no... This...can’t be...”

Liese weakly shook her head and reached out to the fallen flower. Her spear fell to the ground with a loud clang, but she hadn’t even noticed.

I was no better. My eyes were fixed on the same thing hers were: the brilliant white of the lirene—of what *had been* a lirene—was now a hideous, withered black.

“Why? The lirene is...” Lady Kobayashee trailed off in shock.

“Is that flower important?” Lord Endoh asked.

“That’s the flower of Lirenna, the goddess who created their entire world. It can purify stuff and it’s Sieg’s seal—anyway, it’s a really important flower! It’s supposed to be a key item that you can use to restore a tiny piece of Liese-tan’s sanity after she turns... Oh no, what do we do?!”

This was the first time I had ever heard Lady Kobayashee sound so helpless. Every word was uttered through trembling lips.

“S-Sieg!” Liese’s scream brought me back to reality. “Please, return to the ballroom at once!”

Unable to understand what she was saying, I cocked my head to one side. Liese’s pleas grew more and more desperate.

“I’m begging you, *run*! If I fail to fend off the witch, the world will be safe so long as I die! But you? I can’t... I can’t let you...”

Liese’s hysteria was proof that something was terribly wrong. Her face was white as a sheet and she was violently trembling.

“Calm down, Liese. It’ll be all right.” I ran my hand across her back, but her jitters didn’t stop.

“I-I can hear her voice... She’s been speaking to me ever since I touched the

miasma. 'I won't ever be loved,' she says. 'Sieg is going to leave my side forever!'"

Liese cradled the sullen petals in pain. It was true that lirenes symbolized me, and the one in her hand was horribly decayed; I couldn't blame her for worrying. But even so...

"That will never happen." My assertiveness caught Liese off guard, and she stared at me blankly. I looked straight into her eyes and continued. "Liese, you're adorable beyond belief. Everyone here loves you more than you know."

"Th-That's right!" Lady Kobayashee stammered. **"Liese-tan, you're so cute that you charmed us across dimensions!"**

"Why do you think everyone is here to fight?" Lord Endoh said calmly. **"No one is leaving your side, let alone Sieg."**

They were exactly right. The dependable gods put a smile on my face.

"Let's hold hands after all." I sheathed my blade and squeezed her hand, but Liese still looked lost as she looked around us. "We can entrust all this sword and spear business to our friends."

"Rest easy, Lieselotte." The first to speak was Bruno Riefenstahl. "With my beloved firstborn and the king I will one day serve at my back, this blade will cut down any foe!"

The towering general rallied his men; I doubted that there was anyone else in all the land who could inspire as much confidence as he did now.

Baldur marched to his side and Fiene followed on his wing to take their places in front of Liese and I.

"If the main house is the sword, then we branch Riefenstahls are sure to be your shield. They raised me as your brother, and I swear that you'll be safe so long as I'm still standing. Feel free to take a moment to sip some tea and relax."

"Don't worry, Lieselotte! I'll make sure to power up this living shield of yours and repair him if he ever breaks! He might chip or crack, but I'll fix him up like new! You just enjoy that tea of yours, sister dearest."

The two of them exchanged their jokes with dauntless smiles. They looked at

one another with fearless eyes.

“Fiene, go ahead and use all your mana on supportive magic,” Art said, waving his wand. He enveloped Liese in a tender light and added, “Healing is *my* specialty. I once cured a thousand wounds with a single spell—let me show off my skills!”

Art’s smile was as carefree as ever. There was recorded evidence of him healing a thousand injured after a natural disaster; the legend went that he’d cast a spell larger than our entire academy. I knew he wouldn’t let anyone here suffer so much as a scratch. The spell he’d just cast was already improving Liese’s complexion.

“Don’t worry, Miss Liese! Once His Excellency cuts the bad witch up, I’ll burn her to cinders!” Fabian’s adorable smile and voice were in stark contrast to the hellfire he was manipulating overhead. Even from afar, I could tell his fireball was made of ludicrously dense mana. He truly would burn all Liese’s foes to ashes.

“And at the end of it all, allow me to put an end to the witch’s soul. We wouldn’t want her coming back, now would we?” Professor Leon Karlchen’s subdued grin was similarly antithetical to the bone-chilling statements he was making.

“Liese-tan was so lonely in her memoir, and now...” I could hear a tear of what I could only presume to be joy welling up in Lady Kobayashee’s quiet voice. Slowly, she finally began regaining her usual strength. **“Liese-tan! We’re rooting for you too! With all these wonderful friends and a prince who loves you, I know you’re going to be okay!”**

“Liese, look at how much we all love you. The lirene may have wilted, but I’m still here. And I still love you as I always do. If that isn’t enough to best your worries, then all I ask is that you don’t let go.”

Whether from fear or weather, Liese’s hands had been cold. Yet as our fingers intertwined, they slowly took on heat.

You’re alive. You’re here, beside me. These were the emotions her warmth provided me, and I could only pray that she would feel the same.

“...My sincerest apologies. I appear to have lost sight of myself.”

Liese spoke with a steady voice as she squeezed my hand back. She straightened herself and rose to her feet with strength.



That very moment, the lirene in her other hand floated up and began to glow. As if to reciprocate its white radiance, the miasma around the witch's point of appearance had been replaced with a white smoke—and somewhere inside the fog, I saw sparkles of gold.

Although we'd prepared a handful of bonfires to light the yard, the sun had set and it was far darker than daytime. Yet the flower and cloud were glowing a transcendent gold and white.

What in the world?

"I-I don't know what's happening, but it looks like the witch is appearing!" Lady Kobayashee said. **"Huh? Th-There's something in the smoke!"**

"Why does she have a body?!" Lord Endoh cried. **"The Witch of Yore is supposed to be sealed away as a formless spirit!"**

Following the gods' commentary, I turned my attention to the smoke. I could definitely see something within.

Come at us!

A sudden gale swept through the yard. The lirene danced off into the night sky and the cloud obscuring our sight disappeared. What remained was the silhouette of the Witch of Yore. Known as the Great Calamity and Malevolent Black, this sentient catastrophe had felled countless nations and brought our very world to the brink of destruction several times over.

At long last, she appeared before us...groveling in the dirt.

"Why's she kneeling?"

"What's with the pose?"

"Can I try punching her?"

"But what if she's preparing an unusual spell?"

"Stay on guard, this might be a ruse!"

Although we were all thrown into chaotic discussion, not a single person broke their stance—ah, well, other than Art. For whatever reason, he was frozen in place with his jaw wide open.

“The witch’s hair is *white*!” Lord Endoh said, confused.

Both the prophecy and the two gods had claimed the Witch of Yore to be an entity of total darkness. However, in reality she had fair white skin that bordered on translucent, and her hair was a glowing platinum blonde. Her heavenly locks were beautiful enough to steal my breath away. Her strange pose caused it to sprawl out on the ground, filling me with a strange sensation of guilt.

“Why does she look like a P2 color variant? Why is she physically there instead of being an ephemeral ghost?” Lady Kobayashee asked in a rhetorical tone. **“I have no idea. Don’t let your guard down!”**

I nodded out of habit, but the figure on the ground looked so far from evil that I couldn’t bring myself to act. Rather, I had my qualms about trying to hurt someone that looked like they were begging for forgiveness. I was sure everyone else felt the same.

“Oh? Fiene’s making her move!”

“It looks like she’s as lost as us, but her plan is to start off with a punch to test things out. Hm? No, it looks like Art caught on and is moving in to stop her, for some reason...”

Apparently, I’d been wrong. Not *everyone* felt the same, as there were two exceptions that the gods dutifully offered their play-by-play and analysis on.

“Fiene, wait!” Art said. “You can’t hit her, she’s—”

“I-I’m so incredibly sorry for what I’ve done!” the witch shouted.

In a quivering voice, she cut off our wonder-priest. Yet we heard her loud and clear despite the shaky tone: the Witch of Yore had apologized. She raised her head and stared straight at me with shimmering, golden eyes.

“I don’t have any intent to resist! I unconditionally surrender! So please, I humbly beg you to show mercy!” *Slam!* She bowed down so hard that I could hear her head hit the ground.

“Wait, no, oh my—p-please, raise your head!” Art rushed over to her in a panic and tried to help her up. I couldn’t even remember the last time he’d

spoken this politely to someone.

“Let go!” the witch said, pushing him away. “Groveling is the *least* I can do! I’m the Witch of Yore—I’ve done terrible things! I even tried to hurt Lady Lieselotte, and the remnants of my malice attacked her just now... One hundred times is a bit scary, but I can’t argue with being killed!”

Knowing that I was the preeminent authority, Art looked up at me as if *he* were the one begging for forgiveness. *Don’t look at me like that. I don’t know what’s going on.*

“What does this mean?” I asked.

What I’d gleaned up until this point was that as glowy as this clump of white and gold was, she was still the Witch of Yore. I found it awkward to reconcile her infamy and the colors I shared with the Goddess Lirennia herself, but I was still on full alert.

The witch’s voice was shaky as she began to speak; I couldn’t tell for sure because her face was still in the dirt, but she might have been crying.

“Um...I’ve been linking my heart to Lady Lieselotte’s. I was hoping that my loneliness, suffering, frustration, jealousy, and hatred would all resonate with her and we’d sync up together.”

I already knew that. That lined up with what the gods and Liese had told me.

“But then emotions like happiness and bliss came flooding back to me! Thoughts like, *I love Prince Siegwald I love him he’s so cool I love him he’s as lovely as ever I love him oh I love him so much—*”

“Stop! S-Silence!” Liese screamed. She was beet red.

“Yes, ma’am! I’m so sorry!” The witch ground her forehead deeper into the ground and fell quiet.

“Such a shame that everyone here already knew how madly in love Lieselotte is.”

“The two of us have been letting it slip left and right, and it’s not like it’s that hard to figure out. Lately, Liese-tan herself admits it when she loses her temper.”

The witch glanced at me while I was busy smirking at the gods' remarks. Simultaneously, Liese looked up at me with teary eyes. I grinned from ear to ear.

"Miss Witch," I said, "continue, if you would."

Seeing me press for more was quite the shock for Liese, but the witch seemed rather happy and she resumed her story.

"Yes, sir! Gosh, it got so bad that I nearly fell for you myself! I've heard that there's nothing stronger than a lovestruck maiden, and boy, they meant it! As Lady Lieselotte's happiness and love for you filled my empty heart, the ugly feelings clinging to me dissolved away. See, look at my eyes! They're back to their original gold, right?!" The witch raised her head and pointed at her sparkling eyes.

"I wouldn't know what color they originally were," I said, troubled.

"These are, without a doubt, her original eyes." Art sighed. "I'm fairly certain this woman is the Goddess of Creation, Her Holiness Lireнна... Am I right?"

"Yay, you know me! That's right, I'm Lireнна! You have a good eye!"

If we were to believe the two kneeling on the ground, the woman squealing in joy was apparently the Creation Goddess.

"I'm not a priest for nothing," Art said in modesty. He then turned to me. "So it'd *really* make me feel better if we could have her stop grinding her face into the floor. It doesn't look like she has any will to resist, so can we please let her at least sit up?"

"Let's hear what she has to say. I get that Liese-tan's heart cured the Witch of Yore to restore the Creation Goddess to her true form. But why were you a witch to begin with? Why did you attack Liese-tan in particular? And I'm not sure you know the answer, but why can the people of this world hear our voices—including you? Tell us *everything* you know."

Hearing Lady Kobayashee speak, I looked at Lireнна and realized something. "There's nothing stronger than a lovestruck maiden" was a phrase from my color commentator in the heavens, but this new goddess had repeated it moments ago.

“As you wish, Lady Kobayashi, fair goddess of the outer realm. But please, this pitiful fool has sinned so heavily that it pains me to hear you call me a goddess. Lireнна is plenty. And I think we should start with the story of how we first created this world to mirror yours.”

The almighty Goddess Lireнна knew all to be known about our world—perhaps even of Lord Endoh and Lady Kobayashee’s—and she began to tell her tale...

In the beginning, there was one. This singular entity simply *was*—until it eventually came to realize its own state of being. The thing *was*, and it had an overwhelming duty to foster reality.

Immediately after recognizing its own consciousness, the existence was overcome with loneliness. It knew itself to be absolute. It knew itself to be God. It followed that it knew itself to be alone.

Thus, the entity split itself into halves. These two gods leaned on one another, cooperating to create the world.

“Reality is boring. I want others that will talk to us.”

“You want sentience? That will be a daunting task. It will take many eternities, and we may still fail.”

“Then we merely need to imitate creatures from somewhere else. Let us find intelligent life elsewhere and shape our world to support beings like them.”

The two wills converged to give birth to a planet much like the one they used for reference. They made land, seas, and sky, filling them all with the same kinds of life they saw outside of their realm. And so, the world came into being.

“Let us be the mother and father of this land.”

Upon creating their own cast of mortals, the two halves morphed into the Mother Goddess Lireнна and the Father God Kuon, defining themselves with the familiar forms of a humanity from a distant star. With platinum hair and golden eyes, the beautiful pair glowed with holy light.

Seeing one another, the two felt love. They went on to birth all sorts of life:

those that propagated without needing to consume other life, those that soared the skies, those that were strong, those with sharp claws, those with poison, those that bred quickly, and more.

Many things came from their matrimony, but only the fittest went on to survive. After much life and death, at long last, the world saw its first *person* in their image.

“How similarly it looks to us.”

Seeing a creature so perfectly alike to the species the gods had mimicked filled their hearts with love, and their affection for their progeny was to be shared in equal parts between them. Alas, Kuon faltered.

As the first man and woman fell in love, the Father God watched them and pined for a more mortal yearning. And so, he wished to make the first of women his own.

“I have no need for the other.”

Kuon succumbed to his desire, killing Adam in the hopes of winning Eve. Yet he could not erase what had already been, and Eve never forgot her first love. She wailed over her lifelong companion, and no amount of divine passion could get her to smile toward the heavens. The first woman lived out her days, her heart still firmly seated with her lost husband and the children they’d made.

“I wanted to be loved,” Kuon cried. “That is all I ask.”

“I love you,” Lirennia said. “More than anyone else can possibly hope to.”

Yet no matter how many times the goddess put her devotion into words, the god would not cede.

“You are me. I am you. We are one. What point is there to be loved by you? I want Eve to *choose* me. Among the countless possibilities that dot our world, I want her to pick me as the best. I want to be chosen...and loved.”

Whether Kuon’s love was purely romantic or of a broader scope, none could say. Perhaps he’d developed the mortal emotion of obsession, as godly as he was.

Regardless, caught up in the god’s powerful emotion, Eve’s soul was

burdened with the fate of infinite rebirth. She was born, raised, loved, and seen off again and again and again. Yet no matter how many times the cycle repeated, she never came to love the god.

At times, Eve fell for souls other than her original husband. Even so, Kuon alone remained unloved. Was it because he'd killed her first true counterpart? Was it because of his hubris? Was it because gods and humans simply couldn't see eye to eye?

Kuon did not know, but after an eon of repetition, he resolved himself for something new.

"I will become mortal, and win her love as a human."

The Father God steeled himself to end his existence as a divine entity. Yet as patient as Lireнна had been, she could no longer hold her tongue. To lose her counterpart—the one being that she shared equal footing with—was unacceptable.

Thus, the two fought. Born from a single consciousness to a fate of togetherness, the halves began to war in the name of what each called "love."

"Thank you...for killing me."

At long last, Kuon faded away with a smile. He had won, in a sense. One half of the original creator was wiped away from existence, leaving no trace, even in history. The other half wept in sadness and rage, sinking into the darkness.

I hate this. Don't hate me.

I love you. Don't look away.

I hate her. Don't take my light away.

I love you. You're mine.

I hate you.

I love you.

That's why I can't ever forgive or forgive or forgive or forgive or forgive or

forgive or forgive or forgive or forgive or forgive you for abandoning me.

■■■■.

Without Kuon at her side, the ugly pain that Lireнна had long been able to suppress finally swallowed her whole. Once the embodiment of holy light, she fell to be the pitchest black, ready to destroy all that she had birthed.

Lireнна enacted her vengeance on the woman who had stolen Kuon's heart, and on the people surrounding the woman, as if to assault the world with her distorted emotion. Her hatred rained down on the land as a curse.

Her blight gave birth to monsters that attacked humans, caused natural disasters, and toyed with the minds of mortals. Those who survived her trials came to know her as the Great Calamity or Malevolent Black.

Weakened by the long war between godly halves, Lireнна was pushed back by the concerted effort of humanity. Alas, she was the mother to all of existence; time and time again, she gathered or stole the powers of her creation to resurrect herself and once again throw the world into chaos.

Months became years, then decades, and history spoke of her legend as the terrible Witch of Yore.

"...And so, basically, Kuon and I had this huge lover's quarrel. In the end, he managed to get what he wanted by erasing his existence as a god in this world, and I turned into the Witch of Yore because of it."

After listening to the goddess's tale, every single one of us stood at a loss for words. Hearing the history of our universe and the origin of our people straight from the source was an incredible privilege. It was, but...

"You tried to destroy our world because of jealousy..." Fiene's quiet mumbling cut through the silence loud and clear. The atmosphere that followed was difficult to describe.

Fiene said what we'd all been thinking. The scale of the issue in question was massive, but the overall summary was just ridiculous.

“Yup, that’s about right,” Lireнна said. “My husband Kuon cheated on me and skipped out of town, so I lost my marbles and threw a huge fit. That’s all there is to me being the Witch of Yore.”

The Goddess Lireнна acknowledged Fiene’s accusation without hesitation, but I couldn’t do the same. I’m sure the others were just as lost. I looked around to see everyone present staring at their shoes with difficult expressions.

“Um, so, uh... Sorry.”

Noticing our discomfort, Lireнна planted her forehead back on the dirt. Not even Art bothered to help her up; he instead stared at the back of her head in a daze. Frankly, I think he made the right call.

“But, hey, um, a bunch of wonderful gods rose up to stop me! And I know Kuon’s a total mess, but I feel like the world we made together is a really nice place. The apple doesn’t always fall so close to the tree, and all that...” The goddess glanced up at me with expectation. “Right?!”

“Oh, speaking of which,” Art said, cocking his head, “who exactly *are* all the gods we worship outside of you, Lady Lireнна?”

I’d been wondering the same thing. Lireнна once again sat up, put on a contemplative face, and started thinking. We all waited without a word.

“Um, well... Where should I begin? Let me think... Oh, I know. What do you all think magic is?” After seeing us all tilt our heads, Lireнна continued.

“Spellcasting is the art of directly meddling with the fabric of reality to bring about specific effects. Generally, it’s on a smaller scale than what I can do, but what you call ‘magic’ is the same thing as my divine powers. They’re the administrative tools that Kuon and I used to shape the world.”

The Creation Goddess’s groundbreaking news sent a wave of confusion throughout the yard, but she paid us no mind. Without any ado whatsoever, she went on.

“Kuon and I clashed until every bit of his heavenly power was chipped away. The remnants of his strength were scattered across the globe, and since you humans happen to be similar to us, it came to rest in your bodies. Originally, this kingdom was founded by a bunch of people like that, and they decided to

give themselves authority by claiming to be nobility. After a whole bunch of generations of marriages between the bloodlines with Kuon's power, it looks like you've naturally evolved to manipulate more magical energy. But to start, I think your forefathers just happened to be similar to us."

The murmurs in our midst grew even stronger. Those around us desperately stared at me and Art in hopes of being led by a royal or by an educated priest.

"Among them, there were some with plenty of talent who worked extremely hard. They managed to accumulate so much magical power that they were able to defeat me—that is to say, they'd entered the realm of divinity. They sharpened their arcane skills, deepened their mystic understanding, and came to recognize the truth of the world. These enlightened souls went on to become moderators of the planet after death, and are who you worship as newer gods today. Even among the people present tonight, I count...more than one with the potential to join them."

The First Goddess had come this far without pause, but she finally took a moment to sigh.

"At first, we created your kind just to have some company. I never imagined that you would grow up to inherit our powers and carry the burden of caring for our world as gods. Children truly do grow up quickly, don't they?"

Lireнна smiled like a proud mother. However, her explanation had only raised further questions for a member of the royal family like myself.

"Then why," I asked, "does my house have the power to hear the Voices of the Gods? If the divine are meant to be ascendants from our own people, then what about the records of otherworldly knowledge bestowed upon us through prophecy? What even *is* this power to begin with?"

"Uh, well, the whole Voices of the Gods system is...frankly, a tool to cheat. We modeled everything after Lord Endo and Lady Kobayashi's world, so we figured it would be nice to have a way to help our people's culture and technology catch up. But explaining intricate details was such a pain—uh, I mean... See, it was just kind of a hassle—er, um... Well, you know, I'm not an expert or anything, so it would be so hard to get the point across if I had to explain everything! Right?!"

The prophetic ear that put my family into power had been created to serve the Goddess Lireнна and her *laziness*. Everyone's gazes shifted from expectation to pity. I soldiered through their painful stares with the fakest smile I could muster.

"So, um, anyway. We made this system where the brightest minds of Lord Endo and Lady Kobayashi's world can leave messages for our planet after death. Once that was done, we picked a handful of families to inherit the ability to hear the messages, and the Fitzenhagen bloodline was one of them. Then we told them, 'Make a country that can lead the world, and spread the word to your neighboring nations.' For some reason, they got the idea that the tidbits of advice were from the gods. And, um..."

There's more?! By this point, I was feeling rather down on myself. Still, I continued to listen to her explanation.

"The whole 'prophecy' thing isn't my work, but something the newer generations of gods came up with. I'm not totally sure because this is someone else's handiwork, but my best guess is that they were all, 'Whoa, the mortal realm sure is in dire straits. Man, if only we could tell them they're in for some steep trouble. Oh, I know! They have this Voices of the Gods thing, so I'm sure it's fine for us to use it too. Let's go team Fitzenhagen!' Or something like that."

"Hold it!" Lady Kobayashee exclaimed in a state of panic. **"We're not dead, and we definitely aren't the 'brightest minds' or whatever. Plus, we're not gods of your world, so what about us? How come we're able to talk to everyone through *Magikoi*? While we're at it, why were we able to bless people like real gods?"**

"That's, um..." Lireнна awkwardly looked around. "It's probably my stalker husband's fault."

As the Goddess Lireнна mumbled out her answer, she slowly reverted to her now-familiar groveling pose. I no longer had any qualms about seeing her shining hair flow out over the mud.

"At first," Lireнна said, "Kuon tried to reincarnate as a human in our world, but the curse I scattered everywhere prevented him from doing that. But even without his powers, Kuon was still technically a representation of the world

itself, and so he couldn't reincarnate in yours either. Eventually, he ended up possessing some poor soul in your world..."

"Wait, *possessing*?!" Lord Endoh asked. **"He's not his own person?"**

"You don't mean...Kuon Kirise?" Lady Kobayashee said in shock. **"He's being controlled by the God Kuon?!"**

Lireнна looked up for a moment when the gods began to shout, but quickly ground her temples back into the floor. Her form was so perfect that I began to think we ought to replace all the statues in our churches with a groveling version of her. This pointless fantasy was far more palatable than the situation I faced at present, and it only got worse as Lireнна quietly answered in a voice oozing with remorse.

"That's right. To make matters short, Kuon used Kirise's body to create *Magikoi*. His plan is to use the game as a medium to summon Fiene to your world, since she has Eve's soul. Overall, *Magikoi*—"

"Wait, wait, *what*?!" Fiene screamed. "Hang on! I heard you say something insane!"

Lireнна paused her explanation and stared at Fiene, puzzled. In return, Fiene slowed down and asked her question more explicitly.

"Um, does this mean I'm Eve? Or at least her reincarnation?"

"...Duh? That's why I clung to Lady Lieselotte, since she shared the same jealousy toward you as I did."

The way the goddess made it sound like the news was beyond obvious struck a nerve with Fiene. Her voice turned into a low growl, and her question sounded more like interrogation.

"What did you mean when you said he wants to 'summon' me to Lady Kobayashie's world?"

"It's exactly what it sounds like. Kuon wants to rip your soul out of your body and plop it into a fresh corpse, or someone who's already dead inside. Then, I'd imagine he wants to act all lovey dovey with you until you both die."

"Oh my gosh, all this 'fresh corpse' and 'dead inside' stuff is so messed up,"

Lady Kobayashee whispered.

“That means Kuon’s willing to prepare something like that in our world for Fiene, right?” Lord Endoh asked, his quiet voice rippling through the air.

Without a soul to inhabit her body, Fiene would likely be dead or all but dead in our world. Realizing that she was the target of such a diabolical plan drained all the color from her face. She stumbled backward, and Baldur promptly stepped in place to catch her. The news stirred up our emotions, and Liese and I glared daggers at the groveling goddess.

“I-I’m so sorry!” Lireнна said, bowing once more.

“An apology does not suffice,” Liese said in a harsh tone. “I can accept that I was attacked due to my emotional shortcomings, but Fiene is innocent! To think that your other half would go so far as to harm a blameless person in another world in a sick attempt at winning my sister’s love... How foolish can he be?!”

“Kuon and I are incompetent fools, and I can’t apologize enough for what we’ve done.” Lireнна gradually buried her head under more dirt, only to suddenly shoot up with tears in her golden eyes. “B-But! Your heart is beautiful, Lady Lieselotte! When I linked my soul to yours, you *saved* me! I’ll bear the responsibility of my own crimes, but I refuse to let you deride yourself in this way!”

The goddess’s desperate objection managed to overwhelm Liese, causing my fiancée to bite her tongue.

“I agree that my Liese is a wonderful girl loved by all,” I said, and in her stead asked, “but what exactly do you mean when you say she ‘saved’ you?”

“At first, I thought Lady Lieselotte was the same as me,” Lireнна said, still facing the floor. “Plus, she’s physically and magically strong, so I just thought of her as a convenient target. But Lady Kobayashi and Lord Endo protected her, and what’s more, you showered her with love, Siegwald. Most important of all, she has a virtuous heart that shines with the brilliant rays of true love. In the end...I realized that we’re nothing alike.”

Beside me, Liese hung her head. The embarrassment of being praised caused

her face to flush a bright red.

“As I came into contact with Lady Lieselotte’s emotions, I slowly remembered the love I had once held for Kuon and the world we built together. She let me return to my purest form. The attack that accompanied my resurrection was just the last bit of my corrupted soul lashing out... I’m so sorry. Oh, and the lirene only withered because it represents me and all of the things that were going on in my heart. I wasn’t trying to threaten you or anything, it’s just, um —”

“We don’t have all day. Skip all of the excuses.” My order caused Lirenna to pause and take a deep breath.

“When I was the tainted Witch of Yore, I could only fuel myself with unsightly feelings. The jealousy, resentment, and grief I absorbed only twisted me even further. However, my forgotten self was able to collect the warm adoration of all who worshipped me as Lirenna in that time. The hope, love, desires, fortunes, and prayers that you and your ancestors offered at Festivals of Gratitude throughout history all gathered to nourish me. That’s why I have all my powers, and even a real body again! Look at me, I have *legs*! The Mother Goddess of Creation is here in all her glory!”

Lirenna jumped to her feet and showed off her holy shine. Her platinum hair fell past her waist, and her arms and legs were long and slender. Even the pieces of dirt clinging to her seemed divine as her entire body glowed in a brilliant radiance.

“The second coming of the Goddess Lirenna...” Being a devout priest, Art had tears in his eyes. He didn’t seem to mind all the mud on the goddess’s forehead, hands, knees, and even hair.

Of course, the Creation Goddess regaining her true powers was cause for celebration. Her renewed ability to know the truths of our world and beyond was great and all, but...

“It’s all thanks to you, Lady Lieselotte! Thank you so much!” Lirenna exclaimed. She then turned to Art with clasped hands. “And so, um...do you think you could arrange for her to be honored by the Church in some way?”

...The way the Goddess Lirenna begged a priest of her own religion was just so

pathetic. I could hardly believe she was divine.

“Of course!” Art said. “I’m sure she’ll be exalted as a saint...which means other countries will want her on their side. Can you two hurry up and get married already? If you do, we can invite Her Holiness Lireнна to show up with a hurrah and announce Lady Lieselotte’s sainthood then and there.”

Apparently, my best friend did not share my concerns, and he casually threw together a wedding plan for me and Liese. My brain paused at the sudden shift in conversation, but my bright red fiancée began shouting without skipping a beat.

“M-Marry?! What in the world are you saying?!”

“No, no, I’m serious,” Art said. “Lady Lieselotte, you’re the daughter of a marquis who also happens to be the head general of a kingdom, *and* you’ve been training to be a queen since childhood, *plus* you’re beautiful. If you ascend to being the saint who revived the Goddess of Creation, people will start wars over your hand in marriage. So if you and Sieg can hurry it up with a wedding sponsored by the gods themselves, that would do wonders to stop a lot of strife.”

“I agree! Endo and I are totally on board!”

Art’s calm explanation was immediately followed by Lady Kobayashee’s excited voice. As the second party in this wedding for two, I was bewildered.

Wait, give me a second here.

“Then I simply won’t become a saint!” Liese said. “I haven’t done anything noteworthy to begin with, and a holy title like this is better suited for another. In fact, if you’re so keen on these theological pursuits, why don’t you take my place, Artur Richter?”

“No, nope, nuh-uh. I’m not lying about this,” Art said. “Her Holiness is back, and I’m not about to pretend she isn’t. There are other branches of faith outside of our country, so I doubt I could hide her presence for long anyway. Besides, if you have the Mother Goddess’s backing on the day of your wedding, your position as queen will be set in stone. You’ll never have to worry about your husband having an affair, and who will dare to politically oppose a literal

saint? It's good for the kingdom, so can you please just go along with it? I'm pretty sure the higher-ups at the Church will tear me to shreds if you don't..."

"Say what you will, but my marriage is not mine alone." The two were exchanging verbal blows so quickly that I couldn't get in a word. "Affairs of the state dictate when we can hold our wedding. More importantly, His Highness's opinion on the matter supersedes everything."

Please, I'm begging you. Just give me a moment. There's a process to this sort of thing...

"Come on," Art said. "That's an easy fix. Or maybe... Could it be? Lady Lieselotte, do you not *want* to marry Sieg right now?"

"No, I do...um, but..."

Thank goodness. Hearing Liese admit that despite being too embarrassed to look up, I squeezed her hand tight.

"Liese," I said. With a gasp, she turned her gaze to me. I loosened my grip, sliding in front of her and getting down on one knee. "It's a shame my proposal has to come at a time like this."

I awkwardly struggled to make a smile. Yet even so, Liese watched me with glistening eyes, trembling at my words.

"Soon, I will graduate, leaving you here alone for another two years. I'm sure it's going to be difficult to find time with one another. That terrifies me. I know you'd never leave me for another, but I can't stop those around us from loving you. So I want to show the world that you're mine. I want to live with you to spend even a minute longer by your side. I can't bear to wait another moment to ask... Will you marry me?"

I pulled a ring out of my inner breast pocket and tried to slip it onto her left ring finger. Unfortunately, Liese wasn't the only one trembling; my hands were shaking too much to put the ring on properly.

Ah, gods. I'm so uncool.

"I've wanted to do this for quite some time. I've already spoken with both of our parents. I also discussed it with my father's closest royal aides, who helped

me plan. Believe me, it really wasn't meant to be at a place or time like this..."

I'd already lost the air of composure, so I went ahead and laid everything bare. Liese suddenly turned to her father, as if to confirm what I'd said.

"It's the truth," Marquis Riefenstahl said. He was smiling, but there was something melancholic about the way he held back his tears. "His Highness wanted to propose sometime before graduation and hold the wedding by next fall, but...I suppose we can have things ready by the spring. In fact, that's our only choice."

Father and daughter locked eyes with gazes full of meaning. The extent of sentiment exchanged between the two pairs of damp amethyst gems was lost on me.

Eventually, Marquis Riefenstahl averted his eyes with a quiet nod. As Liese also turned away, I could hear her breath catch in her throat. Slowly, she faced me once again.

"...May I?" I'd finally steadied my hands and was ready to put the ring on her.

"I'm...so happy..." Liese placed her other hand on mine, and together, we pushed the ring to the base of her finger.

Fzzt!

Out of nowhere, Lireнна blasted out a ray of light.

"I-I'm sorry! It's just, well, like I said, my soul is linked to Lady Lieselotte's in a lot of ways, and, um... Thank you for the wonderful emotions? Gods like me happen to shine when we receive potent doses of power, and, uh, I didn't mean to..."

As she rapidly made excuse after excuse, Lireнна bent her knees and returned to her default position.

"Read. The. Room."

Lady Kobayashee spoke with a low tone so steeped in fury that Lireнна once again vigorously smashed her head against the ground. Unbearable silence followed, and I had to be the one to break it.

"There are still things we need to learn from this goddess," I said. "Liese,

would you do me the honor of a more put together proposal at a later date?”

Although my fiancée looked incredibly disappointed, she nodded all the same. To begin with, this was all Lireнна’s fault: if she could stay on track for more than a few sentences, none of this would have happened. I wanted to hurry up and be done with her explanations.

“And? What is this ‘*Magikoi*’ that you keep referencing? If Kuon is trying to use it to harm Fiene, then how did Lord Endoh and Lady Kobayashee come to use it to help us?”

I ended up coming off rather harshly despite speaking to a deity. Still, Lireнна didn’t even budge from her groveling position and answered right away.

“Kuon made a game called *Magikoi*, and essentially spread Fiene’s story to as many people as he could in the other world. As more people in that realm think of her and pray for her, the connection between the two worlds grows stronger. Specifically, there’s a route connecting *Fiene* in particular to the universe abroad.”

The goddess’s explanation painted a picture in my mind. First came a lone person walking in the snow. Then, another followed in their footsteps. Another, and another still, treading the same pockets of snowless ground, until there was a full-fledged path through the white powder of winter.

“That connection was meant to be a direct avenue to Kuon, since his long years of stalking Fiene’s soul gives them a lot of history together. Then, he’d turn the emotions of all the young girls who played the game across the globe into his own power. In fact, I suspect he prepared a story that’s similar to that.”

“The God Route,” Lady Kobayashee spat in rage.

“That’s it,” Lireнна said, lifting her head just enough to nod. “However, what Kuon didn’t account for was the possibility that his ties of fate to Fiene would lose to someone else’s affinity to the game. Basically... Wait, am I allowed to say this?”

Lireнна cocked her head with a puzzled expression. She looked my way, and when we met eyes, I mirrored her confusion. I didn’t know why she’d stopped, but I figured it didn’t hurt to nod her along.

“Basically, Kuon and Fiene’s bond was weaker than Lady Kobayashi and Lord Endo’s bond to Lady Lieselotte. I can only speculate as to why their bond is so strong, but my best guess is that these youthful gods might have empathized with her passionate, purehearted, and one-sided love. Then, they just happened to slot into the position Kuon had made for himself as the Voices of the Gods.”

One...sided...love? Whether Lireнна was talking about Lord Endoh or Lady Kobayashee, that was *not* something that ought to be revealed so frivolously. It *had* absolutely hurt to nod her along. A cold sweat ran down my spine and Liese looked like she was ready to strike the goddess down where she laid.

“But there are other possibilities! Maybe one of them has the exact same personality as someone here! Or maybe their souls are really similar to the people of this kingdom! Who knows, maybe they’re perfectly suited to wielding power that comes from the hearts of young girls! They might just happen to care more about this world than anyone else! I only made my first guess because it seemed like their attachment revolved around Lady Lieselotte, and —”

“You’re getting off track again, you useless goddess.” Lord Endoh sighed in a way that made his irritation clear.

“Erk!” Lireнна croaked. “Anyway, I’m sure the reason you two wonderful gods ended up like this is that Kuon mistakenly let his pathway to this world slip to your location. Your powers are a result of all the purehearted prayers that make up the pathway in the first place—which, come to think of it, explains why it didn’t go to Kuon. He’s the furthest thing from pure of heart...”

“You’re going off on *another* tangent,” Lady Kobayashee said. **“Whatever, can you tell us how we ended up ‘blessing’ Liese-tan and Bal?”**

“Oh, divine favor comes from a god’s love and power. In most cases, the god shares a part of their magical energy through a...prayer? I guess? Whenever a god prays for a mortal from the bottom of their heart, it just kind of happens. It’s a quirk of divinity, just like that ray of light from earlier.”

“Oh, I remember that...” Lady Kobayashee said.

Lireнна’s head had been off the ground for quite a while now, but the

memory of her past mistake caused it to slowly return to earth.

“I’m so sorry! Oh, but since you two are only technically gods in this world when you’re playing *Magikoi*, you shouldn’t have to worry about sparkling on accident or anything! The two instances of divine favor you used were both a part of the wishes accumulated from the game’s playerbase. From my perspective, it looks like Lady Lieselotte and Baldur are being enveloped in the warm love of all the young ladies who want nothing more than for them to live.”

“That sounds like a pretty common hope for all *Magikoi* players, all right,” Lord Endoh said. **“Still, I’m impressed that you know so much about all this.”**

“With almost all of my powers restored, I’m close to being omnipotent. That’s why I can hear your voices. At this point, I have the power to peel Kuon’s soul off of the human Kirise that he’s attached to.” Lireнна stood up with her head held high and looked up at the heavens. “Lady Kobayashi, Lord Endo. I ask of you, please accept my love.”

Suddenly, a beam of golden light shot into the night sky. The holy ray soared higher and higher, further than the stars themselves. Eventually, it made its way to the gods beyond.

“Huh?”

“Whoa, what?!”

“With this, I have blessed the two of you with my divine favor. Should you confront Kuon again, I will be able to tear him off of his poor victim. Then, I can seal him away so that Fiene can live her life without worry. After all that, this awful ‘game’ that Kuon designed can end.” Lireнна flowed like water into her usual pose and begged the two gods. “I know this is an incredible burden, but please, won’t you go and speak with Kuon on my behalf?”

“Sure,” Lady Kobayashee said. Her tone was completely casual. **“I mean, you already blessed us and everything, so... Plus, I feel bad for Kuon Kirise.”**

“Sounds good to me,” Lord Endoh said. **“There is one thing bugging me, though. Since magic doesn’t exist in our world, what point is there to this blessing? Is it just a foothold for you to capture Kuon with?”**

“That isn’t all!” Lireнна hopped up and puffed her chest with pride. “The effects are harder to feel without magic, but you two—wait for it—are now extremely lucky!”

Lireнна went as far as to place her hands on her hips and cock her head toward the heavens. Her prideful demeanor got Art to applaud, but no one else followed suit. Perhaps it was all the dirt on every part of her body that killed her attempt at dignity.

“We’re...lucky? What does that even mean?” Lady Kobayashee asked, unexcited.

“You won’t be winning the lottery or anything, but getting a prize at a small raffle will be easy peasy! Oh, and the two of you are students, right? Hitting closer to home, my power will help you on your exams. When you sit down to take a test...all of the things you studied will show up!”

“But we still have to study?” The disappointment in Lord Endoh’s voice was palpable.

“Of course. If you could get full marks without studying, that would surpass the bounds of luck. This blessing is more of a ‘Oh, nice,’ kind of thing. But you’re going to be kind of lucky for the rest of your lives! You’re going to be a teensy bit luckier no matter what you do! Isn’t that amazing? Aren’t I amazing?!”

“Wow.” Lady Kobayashee was more devoid of emotion than anyone or anything I’d ever heard before. **“Amazing.”**

◆◆◆ Never Meant to Be Heard

It was the last Saturday of November, and the Kobayashi living room was stewing in an uncomfortable mood.

Aoto got up from the sofa in the middle of the room and turned off the game console. He turned back to Shihono, still sitting on the couch.

“I mean,” Aoto said, “being lucky is great and all, but...”

“She juked out all of our preparations, acted pitifully, and her blessing is so *meh*. Some Witch of Yore the Goddess Lireнна turned out to be.”

The two of them sighed together in an attempt to dispel the ugly displeasure welling up inside them.

“Well,” Shihono said, stretching her back, “I’m not gonna complain about the details of a divine blessing we got for free. But still, how were we supposed to see this coming?”

“That’s what I’m saying.” Aoto popped his knuckles to loosen them up after their long gaming session. “I was so tense for the final fight too... Everything that happened came out of left field.”

They had steeled themselves for the final boss fight, anxiety causing both of them to stiffen up to the point of soreness. They’d amassed the strongest party they could manage, even receiving a surprise visit from Leon, yet they had still sat frozen in fear at the possibility that someone might die.

All the while, the two of them had been praying with all their hearts for Lieselotte and her friends to get through the battle without incident. However, when the black fog had settled, they’d been greeted by a thoughtless goddess just as in love with Lieselotte as they were. Their dissatisfaction was a matter of course.

“Well, at least Lireнна’s back to normal,” Aoto said. “We got to learn a lot thanks to her...”

The boy was absolutely positive that, had the goddess gone on for any longer, she would have likened Lieselotte's one-sided love for Sieg to his own hidden crush. He'd managed to cut her off just in time, but a cold sweat ran down his back all the same.

"But seeing the goddess like that was so disappointing... Did you see all the blank looks on everyone's faces? Fabby-boo had to shoot the fireball he prepared into the sky like a firework, for crying out loud."

"Come to think of it," Aoto said in realization, "I feel so bad for Professor Leon."

"He went out of his way to dress up in costume, even if his disguise sucked," Shihono said. "It must've taken guts to show his powers in public."

"That brainless goddess really managed to screw up every little detail, huh? Begging on her knees isn't gonna be enough to be forgiven for all she's done..."

Once again, the two heaved a heavy sigh in unison.

"But hey!" Shihono pumped her fist to reinvigorate herself. "Either way, we still have to go visit Kuon Kirise and peel that evil god off of him!"

"I was about to say 'evil god' is a bit harsh, but that sounds about right. The only problem is how we find Kuon Kirise. I guess his college is our best bet, but what do we even do if we find him? Can we peel off an evil god when other people are watching?"

"Finding a secluded spot would be for the best. I predict that Kuon Kirise's soul will need some time to take back control of his body, so he'll pass out for a bit after I exorcise him."

Aoto and Shihono froze when they suddenly heard a voice that they'd previously only heard from the TV's speakers. Aoto instantly looked over at the game console, but both it and the television were turned off. To begin with, the Goddess Lireнна's voice was coming from straight above.

"But thanks to, ahem, *yours truly*, you two are super lucky!" Despite being reduced to a disembodied voice, Lireнна's smug grin flashed in the young duo's minds. **"I'm sure you'll run into him if you loiter around a place he frequents!"**

“Blegh, the goddess is following us around. Ewww.”

Shihono’s displeasure came straight from the bottom of her heart. Aoto’s face scrunched up in a similar manner.

“So this is what it’s like to be blessed... Does this mean you were listening this entire time?”

The two high schoolers had called her pitiful and brainless, and had even referred to her other half as an evil god. Aoto worried that Lireнна would be upset with them if she’d overheard everything they’d said. However, the goddess seemed unaffected.

“I was, but everything you said was true, so I can’t be mad!”

“You can’t?” he asked, incredulous. “Well, it’s not like I planned on taking back what I said.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Shihono said in a mild panic. “I don’t mind that you were listening in until now, but does this mean you’re going to be peeping on us and commenting on our every move from now on?”

In an instant, Aoto’s expression shifted to grave sobriety.

“All right, let’s go catch Kuon. You won’t spy on us after we’re done, will you?”

“N-No, of course not! Uh, um, don’t worry! I bestowed my divine favor on the *two* of you, so I can’t even peek in if you aren’t together! I won’t and can’t invade your privacy when either one of you are on your own. Lord Endo, I swear on my name as the First Goddess to stop meddling in your world once we catch Kuon!”

“In that case, I *guess* it’s fine,” Shihono said. “Kinda. Er, well...honestly, this is awful.”

“It really is,” Aoto said. “Having a constant observer that adds comments out of the blue is terrible. How do Fiene and Sieg put up with this?”

“I bet it’s because they seriously believe we’re gods. I don’t think I’d mind as much if Lireнна acted more holy...”

“Oh, I feel that...”

Yet again, the pair exchanged deep sighs.

“H-Hey, this whole ‘game’ will be over once we snag Kuon! Just put up with me for a little longer! Please?”

“Fair enough,” Shihono said with a nod. “Wow, this ‘game’ we’ve been playing since the spring semester is finally coming to an end. When I think of it like that, Lireнна’s voice seems so...no, never mind. She’s annoying. Anyway, let’s catch ourselves an evil god! I can’t live with Lireнна breathing down my neck, so let’s go first thing tomorrow!”

Shihono pumped her fist with vigor. Sealing away an evil god was no small feat. Yet for some reason, the two of them were preparing with all the gravity of a pair of grade schoolers going out to catch beetles.

“Woo,” Aoto said, slowly raising a loose fist.

The following day, Aoto and Shihono wound up dragging their feet right at the edge of Kuon Kirise’s college campus. Although the front gate was open, they could hardly see anyone on the premises. The quietness only accentuated the size of the empty space; unable to intrude on a place like this, the two of them spoke in hushed whispers.

“I guess it *is* Sunday,” Aoto said.

“I just checked with my sister, and apparently there are a few classes here on Saturdays, but literally none on Sundays,” Shihono said. “Pretty much nobody comes to school unless there’s something special going on.”

“There’s no way that ‘good luck’ is going to be enough to find him when the campus is this deserted.”

“Yup.” Shihono’s phone buzzed once, and after a pause, she said, “Oh, maybe our blessing is kicking in! One of my big sister’s friends borderline stalks Kuon Kirise, and she has his full class schedule. Look!”

Shihono raised her phone so Aoto could get a good look over her shoulder. As they scrolled through Kirise’s regular itinerary, it became clear that their chances of bumping into him today were abysmal. In short, the notes said that

the actor had professional responsibilities to attend to on days without class, so he wouldn't have any reason to be around his school on a Sunday.

"I guess we're going home," Aoto said, ready to give up.

"Yeah, let's come back some other time." Shihono seemed just as dejected as she typed up a response to her sister. "Ughhh, I'm sorry. I should've asked sis for help *before* we came all the way out here..."

"Don't sweat it. I didn't even think about the fact that colleges don't have classes on Sundays. Let's just call this a scouting trip and go out for lunch."

Aoto's attempt to lift the mood worked wonders, and Shihono's expression quickly shifted to a cheery smile.

At the same time, Shihono's sister finally ran out of Kuon Kirise intel to share. With the phone still in plain view, a final message appeared on screen: *You should've just asked me if you want to meet him. I'll show you around if you come visit on a weekday!*

Shihono only glanced at the pop-up for a moment before her fingers had typed up a response: *No way.*

"Pft!" Aoto failed to contain a laugh, causing Shihono to look up at him, embarrassed. Still snickering, he said, "Ah, my bad. You're usually such an angel, but you're really tough on your sister, and I thought that was kinda funny."

Shihono looked down with a small pout. This little display of rebellion, combined with her spoiled, affectionate tone when she talked about her "sis," pointed to a side of the girl that she only showed around home. Getting a glimpse at something closer to Shihono's true self made Aoto feel warm and fuzzy inside. In fact, he'd totally forgotten all about their god-dispelling mission.

Another message caused Shihono's phone to buzz, this time accompanied by an emoji of a crying penguin: *What do you mean no way?!?! Why is my little Sheepo so mean to me lately?! (ToT)*

Aoto's laughter only grew louder after reading the cute pet name Shihono's sister had for her. She glared at him, her eyes wet with embarrassment.

"Sorry," he said. "Pft, pffft, ahem. So your name's Sheepo?"

“Ugh! That’s a nickname I’ve had since I was really little, and it stuck with my sister. I keep telling her to stop calling me that, but she never listens! Oh my gosh, this is why having an older sister sucks!”

Shihono thrust her phone into her bag. Aoto felt guilty for how much he’d teased her, especially since her sister was now getting left on read for something he’d done. As a small form of penance, he made a casual suggestion.

“Your sister’s family and all, so maybe we can just explain what’s going on and have her help us.”

“...Sorry,” Shihono croaked, tears welling in her eyes. “I...don’t want to.”

“Huh?!” Aoto panicked upon seeing her reaction. “Uh, sorry! I wasn’t all that serious about it, so you can completely ignore me if you’re on bad terms with your sister. I’m really sorry if I stuck my nose in too deep into your family business!”

“I don’t hate my sister or anything.” Shihono was clearly dispirited, and her words were broken up by sniffles. “She’s pretty, smart, and I’m proud to call her family—she even lent me the clothes I’m wearing right now. But...I’m sorry. I don’t want to tell her about Liese-tan. Anything else would be fine, but I want to solve this with just the two of us.”

Aoto nodded along fervently while desperately trying to think of something to say. However, before he could come up with anything, the Goddess Lirenna’s voice shattered the awkward atmosphere.

“Excuse me, Lady Kobayashi, Lord Endo! Um, I’ve been trying to stay quiet because I feel like you two sort of hate me, but this is an emergency! Can you please head north from here? I’m sensing Kuon—or at least, something vaguely Kuon-like! Whatever or whoever it is, it’s about five hundred meters northwest!”

“...Should we check it out?”

Shihono’s voice was still choked up, but she wiped away her tears. Aoto breathed a sigh of relief that they managed to escape the terrible mood from before and nodded.

“Yeah, let’s go. Sorry for what I said.”

“Don’t apologize. I should be saying sorry for losing my cool out of nowhere.”

Once the two exchanged apologies, they set off without a word. After months of being in the same class, club, and sharing the role of gods together, Aoto realized that he’d gotten a bit careless. No matter how close they’d grown, he thought, no friend should touch on family matters uninvited. As he reflected on his actions, the pair marched on to the quietest part of the lonely campus.

The two of them ended up behind the college’s library. Surrounded by large trees that spoke to the long history of the university they were planted on, the silent grove had a sacred air to it.

There, they came across a sloppily dressed young man. He seemed reserved, both from his clothes and his thick, black-rimmed glasses. A lone white cat was resting by his feet, feverishly wolfing down hard kibble bits on a plate—no doubt items that the man had brought.

“Hey, look how friendly she is now. It took so long to get to this point... Can’t we take her home today?”

The man’s gaze never left the cat while he spoke to no one in particular. Shihono and Aoto had been preparing to call out to him, but exchanged hesitant glances when they saw his strange behavior.

“What do you mean you don’t want a white one? ...Pink? There’s no such thing as a pink cat. Come on, her paws are pink, and her belly is *kinda* pink. Let’s take her home already.”

Who the heck is he talking to? Aoto thought. Despite his bewilderment, he took a step forward, placing himself slightly in front of Shihono.

“God, you’re so annoying. What’s with—hm?”

The man stopped to look up at Aoto in the middle of his aggravated soliloquy. His expression was listless and his hair unstyled. There were little pills of wool on his casual sweater. Above all else, he was dark and gloomy to the point where no one would ever think him to be an actor.

Yet on closer inspection, the man was incredibly handsome. The facial

features suave enough to make his lame glasses look chic belonged to none other than Kuon Kirise himself.

“Whoa, who are—what? *Huh?* Your wife? What do you mean these kids smell like your wife? You mean the girlfriend you’re always going on about? ...No? *Huh?* That doesn’t make sense. Hello? Why’d you shut up, Kuon?”

Being confronted by unexpected visitors caused Kirise to fire off a volley of questions, but none of them were directed at the high schoolers. Unfortunately, his conversational partner refused to respond, and he was left in total confusion.

“Kuon’s presence grew weaker. Um, which means the person controlling Kirise’s body is Kirise himself. As for my husband...ugh! How in the world did he weasel his way that deep into his soul?”

The goddess’s exasperated tone was enough for Aoto and Shihono to get the gist. Apparently, Kirise wasn’t *completely* possessed, and currently had full control of his body. The evil god had turned tail and fled as soon as he sensed Lireнна’s blessing on the two young souls.

The pair discussed amongst themselves via eye contact, sharing a single message: *what do we do now?*

“Kuon’s spirit is hidden away deep inside Kirise’s soul,” Lireнна said, sounding remorseful. “What’s worse, their existences are far more interlinked than I’d originally imagined. Kuon is probably clinging on for dear life. Do you think the two of you could, I don’t know, upset Kuon on your end somehow? If you don’t destabilize him, I don’t think I’ll be able to peel him away...”

“Easier said than done...”

Aoto was stumped, but not nearly as utterly dazed as Kirise. Taking note of the latter’s confusion, Shihono offered a helping hand.

“Um, how about we start by filling in Mr. Kirise—can I call you that?”

“That’d be great,” Kirise said, still fighting his bewilderment. “Oh, and call me whatever you want. At this point, I’m used to strangers coming up to talk to me like I’m their best friend, so anything works.”

The young man's candid honesty gave off a starkly different impression from the evil god of legend, the famous actor inside the television, and even the sunglasses-wearing Kirise the pair had previously crossed paths with.

Aoto and Shihono spent a long while explaining all the details to Kirise. The whole time, he sat with his legs crossed, petting the white cat sleeping on his lap.

"Uh-huh, gotcha. Okay. Take him away." Kirise was nothing if not frank. "Kuon's caused me a ton of grief too. I'm a major introvert, but he took my body and turned me into a *movie star*, and used all of the money he earned to develop an otome game! What the heck is with that?! Plus, he only gives me my body back once a week, he loses himself to fits of madness, and when I found this cute kitty—look, see?—he wouldn't let me take her home! I've seriously been looking for a way to kick him out. Come on, Kuon, your wife's here to take you home. Hey, Kuon? Hellooo?"

By the end of Kirise's long rant, he was speaking directly to the parasite buried inside of him. Now that Aoto and Shihono had Kirise's consent, they joined in to berate the evil god.

"Kuon, your plan has already failed," Aoto said. "Kobayashi and I stole your spot as the Voices of the Gods, and all the people in the other world are alive and happy."

"Both Liese-tan and Bal managed to avoid death, and Lirennia regained her divinity," Shihono said. "And most importantly, Fiene's head over heels for Bal! You don't have a chance of pushing your way in!"

Alas, their efforts to shake Kuon's spirit were met with zero response. With no way of telling if their words were working, they looked at each other for help. Seeing the two youngsters stuck, Kirise used the lull in the conversation to speak his own mind.

"You know, for all the 'girlfriend this' and 'girlfriend that' Kuon always talked about, it's super freaky that she's not *actually* his girlfriend. She doesn't even *know who he is*, right? That just makes him a full-blown stalker. That's nasty—argh!"

Kirise's rambling was the final straw for the god of evil. The actor's head swayed, and when he looked back up, his expression was wholly different.

"Why is it that not a single one of these mortals reveres me for my divinity?"

The man rose with a spiteful tone, causing the cat on his lap to roll off with a pitiful squeak. It landed on its paws and promptly ran off. The pure malice oozing out of the man's every pore had frightened the cat out of its wits.



“Mortals will insult their creators if they act in a deserving manner.” Lireнна slowly enunciated every word, as if she were speaking to herself as much as Kuon. **“However, honorable and benevolent beings like Lady Kobayashi and Lord Endo will be worshipped as deities despite being mere high schoolers. Lose yourself to your own power and status, and one day someone will strike you down. No one can escape this fate—not even a god of creation.”**

“To think I’d ever see you act all high and mighty,” Kuon spat, glaring at the sky. “What happened in our little garden in the time I was gone?”

“Hmph,” Shihono scoffed. “You thought Liese-tan was just a villainess in your grand scheme, but she happens to be way, way cuter than you could ever imagine. Liese-tan’s so cute that we became gods in your stead, the prince fell in love with her, Lireнна regained her sanity, and every single person around Liese-tan is safe and happy. No one over there is going to die: not Liese-tan, not Bal, and not even the Witch of Yore. They’re locked in for a Happy End to End All Happy Ends!”

Shihono’s smile was chock full of defiance. She placed a hand on her hip and pointed straight at Kuon.

“That’s why an evil god like you who’d get in the way of someone else’s love should give up!” Shihono said. “Let your wife lock you away!”

For a moment, Kuon simply stopped and stared at Shihono. He turned Kirise’s light brown eyes into a mystifying glowing gold. He stared at her for some time, then suddenly chuckled cynically.

“You sure do talk big for someone with such a *twisted* heart.”

Shihono froze. Aoto immediately stepped forward to shield her from his gaze, but Kuon didn’t even notice. The god’s eyes remained fixed on the girl as he piled on his poisoned words.

“Your soul is tainted in the same shade of jealousy as mine. Tell me, girl, do you *really* want a happy ending? Admit it. There’s someone you envy, isn’t there?”

Kuon’s grin was breathtakingly beautiful. His demeanor controlled the scene, as if to say that he was the main character eloquently delivering the final

monologue.

“There’s no such thing as a world where everyone is happy. One person’s smile comes at the cost of another’s tears; the light of joy casts a shadow of despair. And how could it not? All things are limited. That’s why we take from others for our own sake. Everybody does it without thought, without guilt. No one can blame you for wanting to be on the better end of the deal, don’t you think? Hey...how about I lend you a hand?”

Kuon advanced by a single step. Nobody else could move. Not Aoto, nor Shihono hiding behind him, nor even the goddess that was meant to protect them. He’d swallowed them whole, robbing them of their ability to act.

Cling. The sound of metal tapping metal echoed in the silence. What followed was a voice that was never meant to be heard.

“I see no need to lend any ear to a wretch so steeped in ill intent.”

“Liese-tan?!” Hearing her beloved villainess speak from so close to her, Shihono shouted out in reflex. Aoto joined her in quizzically scanning the area.

This was impossible. Yet they knew for a fact that the voice belonged to Lieselotte; they’d spent countless hours watching over her, after all.

“None other. Eldest daughter of the Riefenstahl Marquisate, Lieselotte, at your service. O noble, loving voices from beyond my dream, I take it that you are the gods from beyond Sieg has told me of?”

Lieselotte was calm and collected as her words filled the air. Yet in contrast, Lirennia was in a state of panic.

“L-Lady Kobayashi, it’s the doll! It’s that doll hanging from your backpack! I don’t know why, but part of Lady Lieselotte’s soul is inside of it. Seriously, *why*?! Is it because of my presence? Oh, wait. Lady Lieselotte, are you sleeping?”

“I am indeed. Here I had thought the familiar feeling of those accursed nightmares you showed me to be returning, only to awaken in this tiny body.”

“Oops, it looks like I pulled her spirit along with me. Maybe Lady Kobayashi’s blessing is another reason... But why is she in a doll? Wait, what’s

with this doll, anyway?! It has so much raw *sentiment* packed into it! Does this thing have some sort of mythical origin to it?"

Shihono couldn't keep up with what was happening. Yet as flustered as she was, she managed to answer Lireнна's question.

"Uh, I think it's because I made this by hand. They don't make any Liese-tan plushies even though they have plenty of them for Fiene, so I made my own out of spite."

"Holy moly," Aoto said. "I thought that was an official product this whole time. Kobayashi, you're incredible."

Shihono flashed the awestruck boy a bashful smile.

"Do you see now, you depraved creature?" Lieselotte said to the fallen god. "A pitiful fool like you has no hope of harming me when I inhabit an idol crafted with such care."

Kuon had been bitterly glaring at the doll ever since Lieselotte had first shifted the tide of the conversation. Now, all he could do was hang his head in frustration.

"This body is overflowing with your purehearted love, Lady Kobayashee. Not too long ago, the two of you saved me alongside a shining ray of light. There has been something that has stuck with me ever since you bestowed me with your favor in the spring. I felt it in the ever-present care of your gaze, in the voices calling out to me amidst my nightmare, and again in this doll. This warm kindness is a thing of true beauty."

Lieselotte spoke slowly and with great care. Shihono's eyes gleamed wet with emotion.

"Lady Kobayashee, let me speak of your virtue on your behalf. And you, beside her, as well. I can tell from the way you watched over me that the both of you truly held me dear. To wish for another's dream to come true so earnestly, and to succeed in seeing it come to fruition, is an act of compassion like no other. Do not lend any ear to this sort of meaningless drivel."

"But..." Shihono weakly shook her head. "I can't write off what Kuon said as meaningless. Liese-tan, I...really am jealous of you. I envy you."

“Yet you never once let yourself harm another out of such emotions. Is there anything so wrong with an envious heart? To feel is natural. In fact, Artur Richter goes as far as to voice his frustrations more frequently than not. Being of privileged birth, I have endured my fair share of jealousy. Yet their ill will means nothing to me, as *you* have granted me happiness.”

“But, but! I can’t be like you, Liese-tan! You always put Sieg first, no matter what. I’m just an awful person, getting in the way of my crush’s true love. I’m sure that’s why Endo fell for my sister instead...”

“...Me?”

While Shihono was fighting back waterworks and desperately debating Lieselotte, Aoto tilted his head. He had no idea why his name was being brought up. Unfortunately, Shihono didn’t notice his confusion and continued wading through her sadness.

“I know that once this is all over, I should walk the path of a proud villainess like you and die for the man I love—er, well, maybe not die, but I should at least get out of his way. But it hurts so much that I feel like I won’t be able to do it...”

“How ridiculous.”

Lieselotte’s succinct remark stopped Shihono in her tracks. The high school girl had buried her face in her hands as she tore herself down, and the noble was quick to apologize.

“Ah, my apologies for misspeaking. I ought to elaborate. I don’t find *you* ridiculous, Lady Kobayashee. No, it is the other god to whom I direct my statement. As poorly spoken as I may be, I would wager *you* are the one who needs to explain your thoughts more clearly.”

Shihono looked up, now plagued with a look of confusion.

“Lord Endoh, was it? I daresay you should put your emotions to words. Although I managed to surmise your feelings from a mere handful of observations, there are things in this world that gain meaning when uttered for the first time.”

Now it was Aoto’s turn to hold his head in his hands. *No way*, he thought. *This isn’t happening. Is it? But I guess...*

Aoto's gaze hopped from point to point as his mind did the same. Eventually, he caught a glimpse of Shihono; she was crying and insecure. That was the final push for him to lock eyes with her and lay his heart bare.

"Hey, I think you've got some weird misunderstanding. Let me just make this clear: *you're* the one I like, okay?"

"...Huhwha?"

"Don't you 'huhwha' me. Why did you even think that I was in love with your sister, anyway? I feel like I was super easy to read!"

Even as Aoto raised his voice, Shihono simply stared back with her head still tilted to one side. Realizing that she legitimately did not understand what he was saying, the boy heaved a long sigh. With the most serious expression he could muster, he resolved himself to be as unambiguous as possible.

"I like you, Kobayashi Shihono. I've always, *always* been in love with you ever since I first decided to join the Broadcasting Club."

"No way..." For whatever reason, Shihono *still* didn't believe him.

"I'm serious," Aoto said, halfway to tears. He slumped his shoulders.

"Everyone in our club knows I have a crush on you, and the only reason I joined you for this game in the first place is because I liked you. Going back a few steps...why did you think I had a thing for your sister?"

"B-Because I saw you confess to her at the cultural festival!" Shihono shouted, just as teary as Aoto. "You said she was a perfect angel in every way, and that you were unbelievably, hopelessly in love!"

Aoto grimaced. She'd overheard their conversation after all, but only at the worst possible timing. He regretted having not asked, but realized that it wasn't too late to right his past wrongs and slowly explained what had happened.

"I only said those things to answer your sister when she asked me if I was interested in you. All the stuff about a perfect angel, and me being hopelessly in love was...about you." Although Aoto was bright red from his neck up, he managed to squeeze out the whole story. With a glimmer of hope in his eyes, he glanced at Shihono. "And so, um, from the way you were talking earlier, you...like me too? If, uh, you don't mind, do you wanna go out?"

“I do! I love you too, Endo!”

Shihono didn't so much as pause to think as she instinctively accepted Aoto's confession. However, an afterthought caused her to guiltily peer up at him.

“But, well...do you mind that I fell in love at first listen?”

“At first *listen*?” Aoto asked, cocking his head. He didn't know what that meant, or why Shihono needed to feel sorry for it.

“Yup, love at first listen,” she said, nodding over and over. “It was in April last year, around the time we first entered high school. I happened to hear a really nice voice and when I looked over, I was all, ‘Oh no, he's my type too.’”

“Didn't I have a complete buzz cut back then?” Aoto found it strange that he'd be anyone's type with zero hair, and teasingly pointed this out.

“Yup.” However, Shihono's response was exceedingly flat. “Your head has a really nice shape, Endo.”

“Th-Thanks?” Aoto didn't know how to respond to serious praise about weird things. Still, he started considering shaving his head again in the back of his mind.

“Later on,” Shihono continued, “I'd watch you during baseball practice, and seeing you work so hard made me think you were a good person too. So, um...what I'm trying to say is that I had nothing but ulterior motives when I invited you to the club. I don't think you should call me an angel or whatever, and honestly I feel pretty bad about it... But, um, is that fine?”

“I mean, all I can think of right now is that it's super cute how honest you are. I'll take care of you for the rest of my life.”

Moved by Shihono's openness, Aoto pulled her close and hugged her like he was cradling the most precious thing in the world.

“Th-Thanks,” Shihono said, shyly wrapping her arms behind him.

Unfortunately, there was one person present that did not take kindly to the young couple's heartwarming moment.

“Hey. Brats.” Kuon's voice was practically jumping out of his throat to crawl on the floor. Seeing the two of them tied together before his very eyes was too

much for the unpopular god. He glared at them with muddy hatred.

“Oh, shoot. I totally forgot. Er, sorry, I guess.”

The boy’s awkward apology as he let go of his new girlfriend only served to infuriate Kuon further.

“So you two get to enjoy your love too, huh?” the god said. “Humanity should just end already.”

Aoto reflexively moved to shield Shihono from the hateful god. However, the invincible lovestruck maiden went out of her way to scoff, stepping forward to taunt the pitiful mass of rage.

“Unlike you,” Shihono said, “I never killed my rivals, and I would never hurt Endo or anyone around him to win his love. Instead, I put in a lot of honest effort: I spent so much time thinking about clothes, hair, my body, and conversation topics, all so he’d think I’m cute. And after a year and a half of perseverance, we’ve finally grown close enough to date!”

Kuon could do nothing but angrily stare at the ground. With his immaturity on full display, he looked like a babbling child.

“And when Kobayashi *did* try and get in someone’s way,” Aoto said, “it was always so minor that it was more cute than mean. Kuon, you don’t have a shred of devotion, innocence, or cuteness; you’re sinister, violent, and self-centered. Have you even thought about what would make the girl you like happy? It doesn’t matter how handsome or powerful you are. No one will love someone like you.”

“Just so,” Lieselotte said, chuckling at her own memory. “Fiene confided in me that Baldur won her heart neither through looks nor power. His nearly idiotic level of candid affection, and the calloused hands he earned through years of diligent training broke down her walls. In fact, my sister wouldn’t stop bragging about him when she came to notify me of their official engagement.”

“Wait, they’re finally together?” Shihono asked with a beaming smile. “Yay! Did Sieg’s proposal inspire Bal to follow suit or something?”

“No, I’ve heard that Fiene announced that she was willing to marry him and

inherit the Riefenstahl estate. For his part, Baldur said that he was going to do his utmost to keep her from regretting her decision by... Let me say that I have my reservations about his wording, but he is prepared to ‘tame’ her stomach, as it were. Apparently, he plans to treat her to a happy life full of delicious home cooking.”

“Bal already reeled in his catch, but he’s still preparing more bait!” Shihono squealed with joy. “Oh my gosh, he’s so precious.”

“Straightforward, loyal, and always thinking about what’ll make Fiene happy. That’s Baldur for you,” Aoto said. “Kuon, you were doomed to fail the instant you tried to cheat on Lireнна.”

“Lireнна is my other half!” Kuon said with an annoyed glare. “That *thing* loving me is a given. Isn’t it obvious that I wouldn’t be satisfied with that?”

“You’re terrible.” Shihono eyed him coldly, then turned to the sky. “Lireнна, you should forget about Kuon already and find someone else to love.”

“Ha,” Kuon laughed with scorn. “Lireнна can only love those that are her equal. As worthless as she is to me, she’s still a goddess. There isn’t anyone else that can possibly take my place in her heart.”

“Yeesh, what year is your info from?” Shihono asked. “They have an entire new generation of gods over there. Lireнна isn’t the only deity.”

“...What?” Kuon asked in shock.

“Why are you confused?” Lireнна asked her other half. **“When we crossed fists with all our might, the remnants of our power flew out to every corner of the world to be absorbed by humanity. What do you think the magical spells they use are?”**

Having developed *Magikoi*, Kuon clearly had some means of peeking at the possible futures of his original world. Thus, Lireнна had assumed that he knew about magic and the new age of gods, but she’d been wrong. He was completely lost.

“Uh... I... I just thought that they sure did evolve a lot in the time I wasn’t looking.”

“What? The way they bend the world to their wills is so obviously *our* power. And if a mortal soul manages to gather enough of it, then they’re the same as us. They’re gods, aren’t they? I managed to regain most of my strength, but there’s more than a few young ones that I might not be able to beat.”

Lireнна seemed somewhat proud as she delivered the news. As the Mother Goddess, she boasted about her children like a proud parent. Kuon shut up as the color drained from his face, but Shihono had no intentions of letting him slide.

“See?” she said, smirking. “There are other gods. Lireнна, aren’t there any that you might be interested in?”

“Uh, um, well... There are a few who celebrated my return to glory. And when they told me, ‘I rose to divinity because I felt your pain as the Witch of Yore and wanted to soothe your weary soul,’ my heart skipped a beat or two. But in the end, Kuon is my—”

“Give up on this cheater already.”

Shihono wouldn’t even let Lireнна finish her muttering. Aoto piled on yet another fact to push the goddess away from Kuon.

“Didn’t Artur’s ancestors receive divine favor from gods? Besides, as gross as it is, Kuon fell in love with Eve, right? I feel like Lireнна’s options aren’t as limited as Kuon makes them out to be.”

“But...humans are below her,” Kuon said.

“We keep telling you that the humans you made can become gods,” Shihono said. “Hold on, do we even know for sure that she loved you because you two were equals? I feel like romantic tastes change over time anyway.”

Now at a total loss for words, Kuon merely stood silent. He looked like his soul had left his body, prompting Aoto to whisper a question to the goddess.

“Hey, do you think you can capture him now?”

After a brief moment of silent epiphany, Lireнна shouted, **“Gotcha!”**

The instant the goddess’s excited voice rang out, Kirise’s body lost all

strength. Aoto rushed over to catch him before he fell.

“Hgh...” Suddenly, Kirise gasped for air. “Wh-Whoa. Kuon’s gone...”

The young man blinked a handful of times in a state of awe. Still a bit unsteady, he pushed himself up from Aoto’s arms and raised both of his hands to wave lazily toward the sky. Once again the master of his own body, he shouted up at the heavens.

“Goodbye, Kuon! Make sure to listen to your wife when she scolds you! And thanks for everything!”

“You’re thanking him?” Aoto asked. “Wait, I thought Kuon was using your body for himself six days a week?”

“Oh,” Kirise said, turning around. “Despite everything, Kuon saved my life, you see. When I was in elementary school, I was a sickly, star-crossed, and incredibly pretty boy with only a few years to live.”

“Don’t say that about yourself,” Aoto said.

Kirise smiled.

Despite Aoto’s quip, he could see how a grin like this would necessarily come from a very pretty boy. The high schooler wasn’t wholly satisfied with how Kirise had said it himself, but the conversation moved along when Shihono joined in.

“So Kuon healed you, huh? Still, that doesn’t mean he can use your body however he wants. Lireнна, you better retrain him from scratch!”

“Yes, ma’am! You bet!” Lireнна was full of cheer and energy. **“Don’t worry. I know I’m not the brightest goddess, so I’ll make sure to have my wonderful children help me. I’m not absolute anymore, but I’m not alone either!”**

At that moment, something told Aoto that they were due for a happy ending. The original pair of gods and their relationship had been warped by their loneliness, yet now they would one day return to their original splendor. The boy held this belief close as Lireнна’s voice slowly drifted away.

“Oh, it looks like dawn is just about to break. Lady Lieselotte will awaken soon, and I have to hurry and seal Kuon’s soul away. I think this is it...”

Knowing that the end was close, Shihono rushed to unclip her Lieselotte key-chain from her backpack and stared intently at the noble girl inside.

“Please,” Lieselotte said in a bittersweet tone. **“Don’t cry.”**

Large beads of water bubbled up in Shihono’s eyes. “But I finally have a chance to speak to you, and you’re already leaving...”

“I’m sure this farewell will not be everlasting. Sieg and I will offer our thanks to you in the form of prayer, every day. Somehow, someday, I’m certain that we will meet again. After all, I have your blessing, don’t I?”

Shihono swallowed back her tears and nodded. Far, far away, she heard Lirenna’s voice come down from the heavens.

“Thank you for all that you’ve done! Lady Kobayashi, Lord Endo, I wish you the best!”

“Liese-tan, Lirenna, stay safe!” It took everything Shihono had to wring out her choked words with a smile. “Take care of everyone else, and...goodbye!”

Seeing Shihono grow emotional finally made it set in for Aoto that this was the end.

“I hope all of you can remain true to yourselves and stay happy! Goodbye!”

Whether the pair’s goodbyes reached the world beyond, they had no idea. The silent heavens offered no answer, but the two continued to wave regardless.



Chapter 5: Friends

The day I heard the gods' commentary for the final time remains ever vivid in my memory...

It was the day of the crown's Festival of Gratitude, hosted in the royal palace. Liese, Fiene, Baldur, and Art joined all of our smiling guests in giving thanks that we made it to see this blessed day.

From amidst the merry chatter came Lady Kobayashee's voice.

"Oh my gosh... They're really here..."

Although the goddess seemed somewhat dazed, hearing her voice for the first time in several days stopped me right in my tracks.

"We...managed to turn the final boss back into the Goddess Lirenna, and sealed away Kuon, who was the hidden boss," Lady Kobayashee said. **"That means the game is over, and our role as your play-by-play and color commentators is over too. Maybe that's why we haven't been able to see into your world lately. Maybe it's just because Kuon is gone. Either way, this might be the last time we'll ever get a chance to talk to you. I hope I'm wrong, but I want you to keep that in mind as you listen."**

The revelation that our kingdom had overcome its impending peril brought some amount of joy. However, more than that, I was struck with overwhelming sadness at our upcoming farewell.

"But I'm glad we have a chance to say goodbye," Lord Endoh said, deep emotion baked into his voice. **"I'm glad we get to see you all having fun, and that you're all alive. Most of all, I'm glad that everyone, including Lieselotte, finally has the happiness they deserve... Make sure you all get along without us, okay?"**

I gave a small nod. Some of my guests eyed me quizzically; I had been chatting with someone when the gods had begun to speak, and I'd stopped mid-sentence to listen.

“One day, this happily ever after will just become a part of your everyday life. Even then, I want you to appreciate this Happy End to End All Happy Ends for the total miracle it is! I’ll get really mad if you make Liese-tan cry! I might even smite you!”

Perhaps the nasal tone with which Lady Kobayashee cheerfully delivered her joke was something I projected onto her due to the tears streaming down my own face. If not, then maybe the gods were just as sorry to see us go as I was them. Although I didn’t know which was the truth, I could no longer keep my emotions contained and broke the promise I’d made with them long ago.

“We have been obliged to you,” I loudly declared. **“God of Play-by-Play Casting, Lord Endoh, and Goddess of Color Commentary, Lady Kobayashee. You saved us all: the kingdom, the world, Lieselotte, and me. I will forever worship you as the greatest of all the gods in heaven. Here and now, I offer you my eternal devotion.”**

I knelt down on one knee and bowed my head. My abrupt and strange actions drew the attention of all the partygoers, but that was the last thing on my mind.

“We told you to just listen to us and brush us aside at the very beginning, remember? Jeez...” Lady Kobayashee seemed troubled by my actions and then fell silent.

“Sorry, but Shihono—er, Kobayashi’s not in any state to keep talking...” Lord Endoh said. **“Hey, come on. Don’t cry like that.”**

The two continued to whisper to each other, and while I couldn’t make out what they were saying, the sounds of someone sobbing were loud and clear. I sat and listened. Despite the growing murmurs of the crowd around me, my attention was squarely focused on the gods and the gods alone.

“Hey, Sieg...” Lord Endoh seemed hesitant to speak. **“I know this isn’t the kind of thing to mention when everything’s already been said and done, but...you’ve kinda been mispronouncing our names. Out of everyone from your world, I’d say Lireнна’s the closest to getting it right.”**

“I-I’m so very sorry!” The news sent me into a state of alarm.

“No need to apologize or anything. But we’re not gods anymore, and both

Kobayashi and I feel weird being called a lord and lady. So before we go, we'd like it if you'd remember us the way we introduced ourselves: the play-by-play caster Endo and the color commentator Kobayashi."

Lord Endoh magnanimously looked past my terrible transgression.

"But..." However, the proposition that followed was even more troubling. Even with the permission of the gods themselves, to refer to them so informally was difficult to do.

I instinctively looked around for help and spotted my father vigorously shaking his head, all color drained from his face. Nearby, Fiene was casually nodding. Even the people who could hear the heavenly voices couldn't come to a consensus.

Their messages were loud and clear: my father's was "Know your place! Do everything you can to refuse!" and Fiene's was "Why not?"

"We tried to keep up our godly image until everything was over because we thought you'd feel more secure that way," Lord Endoh said, **"and now it's all finished! Besides, we're the same age! Actually, no, you're a year *older* than us! But most of all...we already think of you as a friend, Sieg. So you can drop the lord and lady and just talk to us casually, um, if that's all right with you."**

Hearing Lord Endoh so meek pricked at my sense of guilt. I supposed I had no other choice.

"As you—er, g-got it." It took everything I had to squeeze out these few words.

"There you go!" Lord Endoh sounded overjoyed. **"Next up is pronunciation!"**

We then went back and forth repeating the gods' names. It took several attempts, but I eventually managed to enunciate the words to Lord Endo's satisfaction.

"Yup, that'll do. Well, that's it for the things we wanted to tell you, so this is really goodbye. Oh, my bad. We're friends, so I think it'd be better to say: see you later."

"Thank you for everything, Endo and Kobayashi." Emotions flooded my mind,

and I managed a smile as I wiped away my tears. Along with the names I had just learned, I offered my friends a proper farewell. “Goodbye...for now. May we meet again.”

“S-See you again!” Lady Kobayashi heaved between sobs.

The goddess’s loud crying echoed in the hall, nearly causing me to burst out in laughter. In fact, Lord Endo failed to hold back and began laughing.

We were two worlds apart, but our hearts were as close as could be. With one final sniffle from Lady Kobayashi, the voices that had followed me since the springtime fell completely silent.

Two months and some change had passed since the gods’ commentary ceased. We were in the middle of winter, and the new year had just begun. Even without heavenly analysis, I was able to make sense of most of Liese’s actions.

...Or so I’d thought.

Liese was full of love and just didn’t know how to express it; she was quick to be embarrassed, but that only made her more adorable. With these truths self-evident, I’d convinced myself that I totally understood her, and our mutual affection had made me confident that we would have nothing to fear going forward.

In short, I’d grown cocky.

When the two voices that had long cheered me on first disappeared, I’d been overcome with loneliness and anxiety. *Will I be able to understand Liese’s true intentions on my own? Will we slide back into the awkward relationship we had before?*

However, despite my fears, I’d recognized that I couldn’t cling to the gods forever and mustered up all my courage. Swearing to become a man that my faraway friends could be proud of, I’d faced Liese head on.

At first, it had taken me time to decipher her messages. Yet I was slowly learning to uncover the truth hidden in her thorned words all on my own...or at

least, I'd thought so. To put it bluntly, her behavior had been bewildering me for a number of days now.

"Very well," Liese said. "With that, I shall be excused."

"Wait, Liese," I said. "How about a cup of tea before you go?"

"My apologies, Your Highness. I have a meeting with Her Majesty to attend to."

Liese curtsied with a phony smile and quickly exited my personal office. This had been the pattern for the last several days; she was polite to the point that I felt a distance between us. Thus far, we'd spent the whole day in the royal palace, preparing our wedding, and yet we had hardly even met eyes, let alone engaged in friendly conversation.

"Hey, why do you think Liese's so angry?"

My question was directed to Art, who was sitting at a table stacked with countless papers. Our wedding required a great deal of cooperation between the Church and crown, and the plans had been thoroughly rushed along to boot.

Thus, Art and a team of priests were here as liaisons. While it wasn't traditional to have the clergy file away paperwork in the palace, this was the most efficient way of handling everything, since they could ask me for my opinion at any time.

All this to say, Art was here to work. He didn't even glance up as he tried to smooth me over.

"Who knows? She looked normal to me. Maybe she really *is* just busy? Speaking of busy, sit down and help. Here, this giant stack needs signatures."

"No, there's definitely something wrong." I sighed as I begrudgingly took my seat. "Liese hasn't even called me by my *name* recently."

I opened up further, but Art was so exhausted from his recent schedule that his tired eyes remained fixed on his work. He tilted his head in a conversational way, but his hand was still scribbling.

"Really?" he asked. "Then I guess it's a case of wedding blues. I feel like not

openly flirting is the bare minimum for etiquette anyway. She might be watching out for single people like me, and honestly? I couldn't care less."

"Don't be so mean."

"You know what's mean? Making me plan out your *wedding*, of all things, when I'm suffering from a broken heart."

Art's quiet grumbling caused my pen hand to stop. I stared at his face in shock.

"Did something happen?" I asked.

Art hadn't told me about any particular girl he was set on as of late. The thought that I'd been totally oblivious to my best friend's suffering made me go pale. However, his response was very matter-of-fact.

"The girl who worked at that café on South Street followed her boyfriend to the countryside."

I couldn't care less.

Sifting through my memory, I recalled that he'd once told me about the girl in question. "She's a bit of a bumpkin, but that's what makes her cute!" he'd said in excitement.

However, Art reported on the beauty and charm of every woman he came across, so this was little more than a verbal tic. What I mean to say is, this sort of episode was business as usual for him, failure included.

"It isn't as if she cheated on you or swindled you out of money, right?" I resumed my work as I kept the conversation going with a casual question.

"No, she didn't do anything like that." Art also seemed rather aloof as he answered. "She was a really nice girl... After asking her out a bunch of times, she finally agreed to a handful of dates. But even then, our relationship was really pure, and she even turned down any money I tried to give her. Just when I started to think about marrying a simple and honest girl like her...someone whisked her away."

Surprisingly, Art had been relatively serious for once. Still, crying over a girl who wasn't even in the city anymore would do him no good.

“I’m glad to hear that respectable young lady managed to escape your venomous fangs,” I said with a joking scoff.

“You’re terrible!” Art broke out into a smirk. “Not you too.”

I looked at him curiously. The word “too” piqued my interest. Noticing my gaze, he flashed me a bitter smile.

“You know, that girl told one of her friends, ‘Lord Artur is so dreamy, but someone like him would never truly love someone like me...’ I tried my best to love her in my own way, but girls have a sixth sense for this sort of thing, so I figured maybe she was right, and... Look, anyway, I’m seriously bummed out.”

Art hung his head. To me, it seemed less like he was hung up on a special girl and more that he was sick of his own frivolity.

Seeing that he was legitimately depressed, I pondered what I could say to cheer him up. At the same time, I had my own bout of self-loathing to overcome; my first instinct was to wish for a play-by-play and analysis to help me out.

“Well, for now,” Art said, stretching his back with a grin, “we need to do something about this mountain of work. Chop chop, get those hands moving or we’ll never get out of here. I want to go home, man.”

Stewards periodically came into the room to drop off more documents, so the ever growing pile of papers truly was a mountain.

“And once we’re finished, you can go visit Lady Lieselotte. Make some time to have a slow, unrushed conversation. Maybe you can visit her at home, where she’s more relaxed? You, Lady Lieselotte, and I have been so ludicrously busy lately—even though this dumb wedding shouldn’t be my problem... Anyway, it’s hard to open up when you’re in a stuffy place like this, and I doubt you’ve been a good listener when you’re worried about making us priests wait.”

Art nonchalantly tacked on his suggestion at the very end of our conversation, but I thought it was great advice. I began chipping away at our mountain of paper with renewed vigor.

For a few minutes thereafter, the sound of pen on paper dominated the room. Then, Art’s voice cut through the scribbling.

“Maybe if I’d gotten more time to go to that café...” he mumbled.

“In this case,” I said, “I think the result would’ve been the same.”

“Don’t say that. I think you’re right, but don’t *say* it. Let me dream a little.”

I glanced up to meet his eyes and we exchanged loose grins.

“Just you watch,” Art said. “Finding a lady to escort to your wedding is a walk in the park for a man of my caliber!”

In truth, the confident gentleman staring back at me was undeniably a good guy. He was kind, handsome, popular, *and* he was of reputable heritage. I genuinely wondered why his romantic endeavors always fell flat. Was it truly because of his flippancy?

Art must have caught on to my rude musings, because the smile on his face vanished.

...Anyway, I got to work. I didn’t want to keep him too long, after all.

By the time I managed to swing by Liese’s house, dinnertime had already come and gone. I bowed away the excessive hospitality of House Riefenstahl’s servants and somehow managed to get an audience alone with my bride-to-be.

Unfortunately, I’d come so late that we decided to just have a short chat in the parlor room. Now that she was in her own territory, Liese’s expression was significantly more tender than when I’d seen her at noon. That being said, she was clearly troubled by my sudden visit: she sat down beside me on the sofa and immediately began to fidget.

“Liese, have I done anything to upset you?” I asked, trying to be frank.

“I’m not upset at all,” she said, puzzled. “Um, have I done something to offend you, Your Highness?”

“Of course not. Your demeanor lately has been perfectly polite...but, well, you’ve been sort of distant.”

My roundabout speech only caused the angle of Liese’s tilted head to deepen. Seeing her so mystified almost made me believe that Art had been right when

he'd attributed her attitude to how busy we were. However, I knew for a fact that something had to be wrong.

After all, I hadn't seen Liese's tsun in days! She'd gone around with a gentle smile, slipping away from trouble and keeping her thoughts to herself. Of course, these were the obvious foundation of aristocratic culture, and I was a prime example of all these things.

But in private, Liese was not that boring of a person. She was *much* cuter than that. Thus, I could only conclude that there was something wrong. With this in mind, I sighed and continued my questioning.

"You've been so cold as of late, treating me like any other stranger... Your smiles have been as phony as mine, haven't they?"

"Your Highness, please," Liese said. "Your smiles are anything but phony, and —"

"Come now. Even I can tell that my grinning feels like nothing more than a mask. I know there are times when our social positions force us to act in certain ways, but I felt so much closer to you back at the academy."

"Um, well, I would venture to say that my behavior in those days was hopelessly poor etiquette..."

Unable to refute me, Liese trailed off. And in that moment, the words of Lady Kobayashi and Lord Endo flashed in my mind.

"From my perspective, today's Liese-tan seems more dejected than angry."

"It looks like there's something on her mind that's making her clam up. Maybe someone said something to make her lose confidence!"

Of course, these voices were a trick of the mind. My brain was automatically imagining what they would have said if they'd been here. Yet real or not, the gods' advice gave me the courage to push forward.

"Liese, there's no need for etiquette between you and me. We're engaged and on the cusp of marriage, so our standing should be as equal as can be. You don't need to speak politely; in fact, it's your responsibility to scold and correct me when I stray from the noble path. If anybody tells you that you need to offer

me your respects, *they* are the ones who are wrong.”

I looked Liese straight in the eye as I spoke. In response, she turned her face down to the ground. Now that I was speaking directly into the crown of her head, I chose to air a more personal grievance.

“Honestly, it hurts to hear my lover quibble over manners and niceties when we’re in private like this. Liese, the adorable way you usually carry yourself overjoys me to no end... So much so that I’m wondering what nosy snob’s careless remarks got you like this.”

My wording was akin to a subdued tantrum. It was childish, even for me. Yet my sincerity came through, and Liese’s face shot up to meet mine.

“Um, you see...” Liese mumbled. “I’ve had cause to reexamine my actions in the near past.”

“And what was that?” I said, furrowing my brow. “Did someone comment on your demeanor?”

“No, nothing of the sort. However, when we visited the palace for a New Year’s greeting...” Liese trailed off and looked off into space, trying to find the right words. I watched her with a tilted head for a short while, and she eventually readied herself with a sigh. “...Fiene had gotten along with everyone in just one meeting.”

A few days prior, the main branch of House Riefenstahl had come to visit the royal palace. I distinctly recalled how Fiene had managed to naturally fit in within minutes of entering the scene.

“I have frequented the palace since I was a young girl,” Liese said. “As I went to meet you and receive instruction from Her Majesty, I slowly earned the respect of those who call the castle home. Yet no matter how many years I dedicated to court life, not once have I seen the sorts of smiles that Fiene brought to the palace.”

What Liese said was true. She was strict on both herself and others, and her distant beauty made it even harder for others to casually smile her way. On the other hand, Fiene’s ignoble upbringing made it easy for others to converse with her; in fact, it seemed that many doted on her like they would a young sister or

daughter.

“Well,” I said, “I’ll admit that Miss Fiene’s ability to charm others is astonishing. But that charisma is one of her unique traits, and I think you’re plenty alluring in your own way, Liese.”

Unfortunately, Liese’s mood did not improve. She merely shook her head from side to side without any energy.

“My sister has the power to lift up all those around her. Everybody loves her, and I’m sure that will include the populace. I can’t help but worry that voices will arise to say *she* should have been queen. I wanted to find a way to earn the good will of others, like she does, and...like *you* do, Your Highness. So I sought to imitate you.”

Apparently, the faux smile that had borne a striking resemblance to my own had been an intentional counterfeit. Yet that seemed strange to me.

“Why not imitate your sister?” I asked.

“I couldn’t.” Liese vigorously shook her head. “I gave up within three seconds.”

“Three seconds?!”

“Initially, I tried to replicate her cheery smile and practiced with a mirror. Alas, I simply am not cut out for such things.”

“...Can I see?”

I failed to hold back my curious nature. Liese hesitated for a moment, but eventually opened her mouth for a wide grin much like Fiene’s. It did not work.

Argh! Why is your dumb smile so stupidly cute?! You’re the cutest girl in the whole world! Her features were so stiff that it cast doubt as to whether she was smiling in joy or seething with rage. I wanted to shout my feelings for her to hear, but I barely managed to hold myself back. I couldn’t cry out and I *definitely* couldn’t laugh. Liese was trying her best!

Whether Liese recognized my internal struggle or whether she simply grew embarrassed from her failed attempt was hard to say, but she quickly shook the expression off her face regardless. Now bright red, she cleared her throat more

than a few times.

“A-At any rate, I concluded that a more modest smile would be a better fit for me. Thus, I chose to model myself after your gentle demeanor, responding to anything and everything with a polite smile. Perhaps I’d taken it a smidge too far, leading to the distance you felt as of late.”

Oh, I see. This put me in quite a pickle. Liese’s objective was inherently flawed, but I would rather not explain *why* that was so.

“Hmm...” I groaned.

Even so, I had no choice but to speak. I took a deep breath and began my spiel with a disclaimer.

“I’m going to say something awful to you, okay?” I said.

“Something...awful?” Liese asked.

“That’s right. Something so awful that you might fall out of love with me when I put it into words.”

“I would never!”

Seeing Liese make her claim with such confidence *before* hearing what I had to say tickled my heartstrings. Her affection helped give me the courage to tell her the ugly truth.

“Ha ha, thank you. All right, here it is: when you let your disdain show on your face, sternly put others in their place, or even carry yourself in a way that causes others to fear you...it helps me out a lot.”

“...What?” Liese’s mind went blank with surprise.

“I have things that I like and dislike too,” I went on. “But all my life, I’ve been told not to let anyone on to what those things are. That, along with my absentminded nature, makes me slow to react, especially when it comes to anger. When you get upset in my stead, it helps me and makes me incredibly happy. What I’m trying to say is, your barbed disposition is a great boon to me when you’re by my side.”

Feeling down from my own explanation, I heaved a sigh. How pathetic could I be? I left the horrible task of playing the villain to Liese, relishing in my position

as the kind prince loved by all... I was cowardice incarnate.

I knew there was a chance Liese could grow sick of me if she found out, and that had caused me to drag my feet. Yet between letting her kill her own personality and having her leave my side in disgust, the latter was far more palatable. She remained dumbfounded, so I continued on with another quiet sigh.

“I’m essentially a pitiful wimp hiding in your shadow. All the people in the castle know that I’m weak and wouldn’t be able to hold my ground against rulers from foreign realms. They all want a queen as steadfast as you. There are many who dote on Miss Fiene wherever she goes, but I’m certain that there are even more people who love your proud virtues, Liese.”

Liese was still frozen, but a smile made its way to my lips. I went on.

“My mother says that she can trust you without me, but fears the day I meet a foreign king without you. My father told me he won’t step off the throne if you aren’t the queen at my side.”

Liese’s status as the saint who had resurrected the Goddess of Creation naturally played a part, but my parents were incredibly fond of her in every other sense too.

“They said that?” Liese asked, tears welling in her eyes.

“So will I.” I leaned on her and took her hand. “I can’t imagine a life without you. Please, won’t you stay with me just the way you are?”

“Sieg...” Liese finally called me by my name. She squeezed my hand back with a happy smile.

Thank the gods. I let relief run through my heart. Having her accept my weaknesses was cause for celebration, but the more important fact was that she no longer seemed intent on pushing herself to fit a mold not made for her.

Liese was at her best when she was a tsun de rais. Not that I’d say that, of course. Yet for some reason, her eyes squinted into a glare.

“Sieg? Are you thinking something strange?”

First Art and now Liese. The people around me were too perceptive. Or

perhaps I was just that easy to read...

My mother had noted how expressionless I was not too long ago. Maybe my time with Lord Endo and Lady Kobayashi had been enough to change me. The thought filled me with a mysterious delight, and I broke out into a genuine grin.

“Not at all,” I said. “I was just thinking that you really are the cutest girl in the world, Liese.”

“S-Stop! Don’t think you can string me along with that smile of yours! I’m not c-cute...”

Liese tried to pull back her hand, but I refused to let go. As we silently played tug of war, I felt like we were both being silly.

“Pft,” Liese chuckled. “Aha ha ha!”

It seemed I wasn’t alone. Our intertwined fingers lost all semblance of strength as we simply laughed in another’s embrace.

Ah, what bliss.

I prayed that I might continue laughing with this adorable girl for the rest of my life. I had only noticed her many charms thanks to Lord Endo and Lady Kobayashi, but I hoped to never lose sight of them.

My silent prayer went out to the gods in another world.

Afterward, I struggled with Liese’s stubborn, bold front on a handful of occasions. Yet each time, we worked to understand one another: she slowed down to try and tell me her honest feelings, and I used my own brain to think through all that she said.

Slowly but surely, my time without the gods passed by. I like to think that the days we spent like that only deepened our love.

At long last, the day of our wedding came.

“Liese, I’m coming in.”

Having finished dressing up, I entered the anteroom my bride was waiting in.

Beside her were plenty of attendants praising her gorgeous looks, but it was as if they and the world at large had lost their shine.

To me, the radiant beauty of the blushing Liese was overpowering. Her divine allure was like that of...

"...A goddess," I said.

"You called?!"

Unfortunately, my first reaction to Liese's grace was intercepted by an unwanted third party. Lireнна hopped in between me and Liese, so I shoved her out of the way and made sure to let my bride hear the truth.

"No. I'm saying that Liese is as beautiful as a goddess. Wait, no, she's far prettier than Lireнна, so...what do I do? Liese, I can't think of anything stunning enough to liken you to!"

Liese awkwardly averted her eyes as I let out my frustration.

"Your Highness, aren't you being a tad rude to Lady Lireнна? Of course, I want you to see me as the finest woman in all the land, at least for today. But I can't help but feel that insulting Lady Lireнна in the process is a bit much."

Although Liese was turned away, her tone and expression hinting at anger, I caught a glimpse of her lips twitching up into a smile. I was enjoying my fiancée's heart-melting cuteness when the goddess I pushed to the side came back to block my view.

"Lady Lieselotte, you're so kind!" Lireнна turned and invaded my personal space, shouting, "On the other hand, what's with you, Siegwald?! I don't think you've ever shown me a shred of respect!"

"The only gods I serve go by the names of Endo and Kobayashi," I said curtly. "I refuse to worship anyone but my two friends."

"But I'm *the* Creation Goddess!" Lireнна said, stamping her feet. "Neither you nor Lady Lieselotte would even exist without me!"

"Such a pity that all you have to be proud of are the accomplishments of yesteryear. It must be tough to grow old," I said with a sneer.

"I can't believe you'd break your princely character just to diss me!" Lireнна

fell to her knees in defeat. “Dang it... Dang it!”

Lireнна continued punching the ground on all fours for a while. As I’d once thought, perhaps it would be best to recreate all the statues in our churches; if nothing else, her image wasn’t fit to be shown standing on two legs. This thought occupied my mind until an unsettling laugh derailed my train of thought.

“Mwa ha ha... But today is the day you thank me, Siegwald! You’ll be praying to me before you know it!”

Lireнна slowly got up and began channeling a large amount of magical power. Platinum light swirled around her as she prepared to cast her spell.

“Feast your eyes in wonder on the power of the Creation Goddess!” Lireнна sang, twirling around in a little dance. “This is my magnum opus!”

The brilliant light dancing alongside her flew into the air, morphing into a pair of shimmering statues.

When the light receded, what was left were a semitransparent boy and girl. They were around my age—no, actually, they were surely a year younger. The hearty boy and cute girl appeared hand in hand. Both of them looked surprised and happy in equal parts, and my expression was no doubt the exact same.

“Long time no see!” the girl said in a familiar voice. “Er, nice to meet you? I guess this would be your first time seeing us, huh?”

I knew it! The girl tilting her head was none other than Lady Kobayashi!

“Hold up,” Lord Endo said. “This is the waiting room for family and stuff, right? Are we allowed to be here?”

“It has been too long, Lady Kobayashi, Lord Endo. There is no need to worry, as Lireнна is here to give Lieselotte her blessing. In fact, I am most honored to have you join us.”

For some reason, my greeting struck a nerve, evidenced by the gods’ irked faces.

“Don’t call me a lady!”

“And quit it with the stuffy language...”

The pair were perfectly in sync. Although I should have felt ashamed for upsetting the gods, my first reaction was to laugh. These two had class, unlike the goddess who'd thrown a tantrum on all fours when I'd refused to respect her.

"Sorry," I said with a light bow. "How's this?"

"Much better," Lady Kobayashi said with a broad grin. "We're friends, remember?"

"You're right," I said. "I'll loosen up a little as well, seeing as I'm surrounded by friends. But let me just say that you two are still the supreme gods in my heart. You watched over us, opened our hearts, imparted your wisdom, and led us all to this blessed day safe and sound. Asking me not to hold you in high regard is a pretty tough task."

"Man, this is sorta embarrassing." Lord Endo shyly scratched his cheek. "Nowadays, we're just a couple of slightly lucky high schoolers."

"Yup," Lady Kobayashi said. "We're such commoners that we ended up wearing our uniforms because we didn't know what to wear to a real prince's wedding."

I felt a bit disappointed. Had I known they were coming, I would have prepared the finest clothes for them. That said, it would have probably been a waste, seeing as they were see-through and all.

Suddenly, I realized that my supremely gorgeous Liese was watching us agape. I'd forgotten that for as long as my two friends had watched over her, this was the first time she'd ever heard their voices. I figured I needed to introduce them, but my bride began to speak first.

"These...voices." A single tear rolled down Liese's cheek. "You two..."

"Whaaa?!" Lady Kobayashi was in a state of shock. "Why are you crying, Liese-tan?! It's way, way, way too early for that! Let's save the tears until you hand the letter to your parents, okay?!"

"Is that even a part of weddings in this country?" Lord Endo asked.

It is not, I answered in my mind. At the same time, I pulled out a handkerchief

to wipe away my fiancée's tears.

"Liese, these two are gods from a foreign plane of existence. Their titles are the play-by-play caster Endo and the color commentator Kobayashi. The two of them protected you from the Witch of Yore, and they opened my eyes to the obvious truth that you are the cutest person in the world. They are our saviors and my dear friends."

"I'm aware," Liese said with a heartfelt nod. "I've seen you two before, in a dream. I'd thought it was a fantasy of my imagination, but... It is good to see you again."

The unexpected turn left me befuddled. Liese and Lady Kobayashi exchanged meaningful looks and nodded to each other. Liese recomposed herself and elegantly pinched her dress, bowing in a dignified curtsy.

"I humbly welcome you to join us today," Liese said. "With all that you have done for us, it is difficult to find where to start expressing my gratitude, but allow me to first show appreciation for our reunion. Thank you very much."

As Liese slowly raised her head, I saw that the tears had disappeared from her eyes. Her unusually serene smile charmed Lady Kobayashi to such a degree that the goddess turned to stone.

"Wait, wait, wait!" Lady Kobayashi said, trembling at what she considered an undue honor. "We're just a pair of Liese-tan fans!"

"That's right," Lord Endo said. "We're just two high school broadcasters who wouldn't give up on our favorite villainess, Lieselotte."

"Fans?" Liese was quizzical.

"Yup!" Lady Kobayashi said. "Liese-tan, you're so darn adorable that we started shouting out in the hopes that Sieg would see your charms."

"Honestly," Lord Endo said, turning to Lirenna. "Just how rotten can the Witch of Yore be to try and possess someone this wonderful?"

Lirenna instantaneously slid into a groveling position.

"What are you saying?" Liese asked. "I'm not adorable. And Sieg! Don't nonchalantly call me the cutest in the world like that! Oh my word, why must

you all tease me together?!”

Lady Kobayashi, Lord Endo, and I exchanged looks. All three of us loved and cared for Liese, and we each smiled together; she really was the cutest.



...And so, with three gods in attendance, the wedding would go down in the annals of history. The day Liese and I married would forever have the honor of being recorded among the countless miracles and triumphs the Play-by-Play Caster Endo and the Color Commentator Kobayashi achieved.

Afterword

First, thank you for picking up this book. My name is Enoshima Suzu.

To those of you that do not know my work, it's nice to meet you. This novel is the second volume in a series, so I humbly ask that you read the first volume of *Endo and Kobayashi Live! The Latest on Tsundere Villainess Lieselotte* as well.

To those of you that do know my work, it's good to see you again! This volume coming into print is all thanks to you! Thank you so much!

This series is now complete. While two volumes may feel short, I'm sincerely grateful that I had the opportunity to give physical form to the whole of my work. Thank you again to everyone who purchased volume one.

Another thank you goes to Eihi, who illustrated the images for this series. Your wonderful drawings make the characters feel alive, and the cuteness hidden in the finer details is amazing. Thank you so much.

Furthermore, a manga adaptation of this story has begun publication in June of this year on B's-LOG COMIC. My heartfelt thanks also goes out to Sakaki Rumiwo, who is drawing the comic. Even as the original author, reading the manga is fun and refreshing, so I hope that it will spark interest in the story for a new audience. Thank you very much.

Despite this being my second work, I needed a ton of assistance from my editor O and all the folks at Kadokawa BOOKS. Thank you for all your help.

And I can't forget to thank my friends, family, and dog Milk for listening to all my troubles.

Also, I know this isn't exactly what you might expect to read in the afterword of a series's finale, but the title is very long. My friend Wontonnoodles came up with the shorthand *TsunLiese*, and I'd love for that to stick.

Although the novels are finished, *TsunLiese's* comic adaptation has just started, and that's only the beginning! We're kicking off a plan to create a radio drama: operation *I Want to Hear the Tsundere Villainess Lieselotte!*

The plan involves a crowdfunding campaign to raise the money needed to develop a radio drama! The most basic reward for donations will be access to the completed work, but backers who donate more will be given more rewards, including an after-story that I plan to write. For those interested, please visit the Kadokawa BOOKS website's editorial blog for more information.

TsunLiese's story ends here, but I pray that I'll return to write a greeting much like this one.

With that hope in my heart, goodbye and see you again.



A meek Lieselotte
opens her mouth.

You...
You
don't
under-
stand,
I...

THIS IS THE
DICTIONARY
DEFINITION OF
CUTE! UGH,
THEY'RE SO
PRECIOUS!

Live! 

Endo and Kobayashi
THE LATEST ON TSUNDERE VILLAINESS
LIESELOTTE



Sincere Knight

BALDUR

Physical Powerhouse

Puppylike Heroine

FIENE

Prince with a Divine Ear

SIEGWALD

Play-by-Play Commentary

ENDO AOTO

Color Commentary

**KOBAYASHI
SHIHONO**

Tsundere Villainess

LIESELOTTE

The antagonist of *Love Me Magically*.
Her fate of ruin at the fall banquet
ticks closer with every day.

"...Sorry."

"Anything
else would
be fine,
but I want
to save
Liese-tan
with just
the two
of us."



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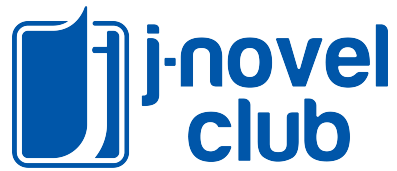
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Endo and Kobayashi Live! The Latest on Tsundere Villainess Lieselotte: Disc 2

by Suzu Enoshima

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